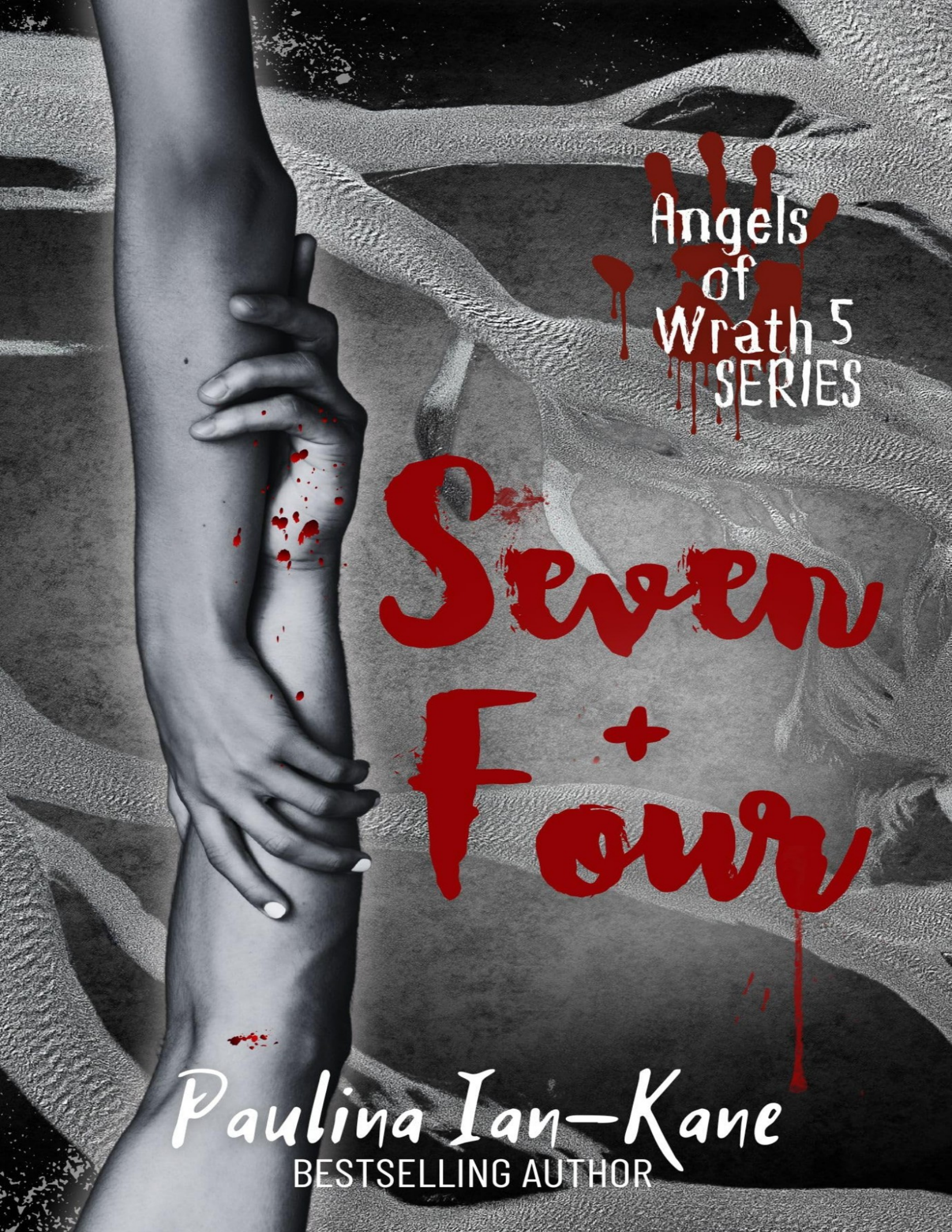
Angels of Wrath 5 SERIES
Seven + Four
Paulina Ian-Kane
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*seven + four*

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ANGELS OF WRATH BOOK 5

# PAULINA IAN-KANE

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# *author's note*

If anyone finds errors in my work, grammatical or otherwise, please don't post it in your reviews but reach out to me. I will be forever grateful for that.

hello@paulinaiankanebooks.com

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# *read before starting the book, please.*

My dearest readers,

Finally Suri time has come. Thank you for your patience.

It has been a long journey, a hard, but enjoyable one. This story utterly consumed me mind and soul, the research was brutal! Getting into a sociopath's head is already tough, but Sari was an even tougher nut to crack. His naivety and gracefulness are quite foreign to me, but I have a friend who reminds me of him quite a lot, so I used her as a raw model… thank you, my sweet.

The rest of the family is very present inside the story, the old couples will be in a few scenes here and there, hope you'll like that. Also this book is a bit gorier than the last ones since one of the MCs is a sociopath.

I took a little literary license when talking about Uri's lake house. It's in Winnetka, a suburban area of Chicago, it has lake houses but not large plots of land.

Please, please enjoy my boys and leave a review or a star rating. Spread the word as much as you can so that I can continue writing other crazy love stories.

Cheers,

Paulina

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Thank you
Also by paulina Ian-kane

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# *triggers*

**This story contains dark themes and potential triggers, including but not limited to:**

Descriptions of childhood trauma and abuse (past)

Chronic illness in a side character (lupus)

Taboo relationship (nonbiological brothers)

Characters with mental disorders (psychopathy, sociopathy, multiplicity, anxiety, trauma)

Stalking of an MC by non-MC character

Accidental consumption of alcohol. Accidental ingestion of a narcotic (cocaine)

Graphic descriptions of violence, torture, murder, and death

References to off-page, past sexual assault and rape (perpetrated by a donor on a non-MC)

References to off-page kidnapping, drugging, and rape by an unknown subject (victim not an MC)

On-page kidnapping, assault, and attempted sexual assault of an MC

**Sex Content:**

Dub-con sex act (non-penetrative) between MCs while one is under the influence of a narcotic

Semi-public sex

Spanking during sex/ domestic discipline (only during sex)

Sex play involving a live (loaded, safety off) gun

Consensual impact play, hand, whip, paddle, and belt

Somnophilia

Secret use of sex toys in public

Mention of a side character recording sex acts without their partner's knowledge or consent

Orgasm control/denial

Sadomasochistic sexual relationship between MCs

Use of sex toys throughout

Unintentional auditory exhibitionism (sex where others can hear)

**Please keep these potential triggers in mind, as your mental health is of the utmost importance.**

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# *main and recurring characters:*

THE SEVEN FOSTER BROTHERS NAMED AFTER THE ANGELS OF WRATH

One, Michael “Mike” Bear-Stone

Two, Raphael “Raph” Bear-Stone

Six, Raguel “Rague” Carver

Three, Ramiel “Rami” Masters

Five, Gabriel “Gabe”/Bezaliel “Bez” Reed

Seven, Uriel “Uri” Mahoe

Four, Sariel “Sari” Bear-Stone

Eight, Uriel’s brother

MOTHERS

Doc. Megan Katherine Bear

Agent Linda Stone

OTHERS

Oliver “Ollie” Carver, Rague’s husband

Sully Carver, Ollie’s brother

Hunter, Rami’s boyfriend

Lori Boone, Gabe/Bez’s fiancé

Ren, one of the Triplets

Dare, one of the Triplets

Ash, one of the Triplets

Clover, thief, works with the brothers

Brad, Sully’s best friend

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# *the code*

1. Kids and pets always have to be protected
2. Be one hundred percent sure the donor deserves it
3. No revenge kills alone
4. Ask your bros for help
5. Let your anchor keep you grounded (Michael's)
6. Sex is the best de-stress there is…and cake, and music! (Ollie's)
7. Share every bloody part (Hunter's)
8. Never keep evidence that can link you to a donor…unless it's pricy lingerie (Rami's)
9. Stalking. Soundtrack. (Lori's)

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*Expectation is the root of all heartache.*
*William Shakespeare*

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# *prologue*

Twenty-two years ago.

*Project: Blood Assassin*

*Subject: Four*

*Day: 730*

*Time: 18:03*

*Subject Four hasn't been delivering satisfactory results. Until now.*

*Physical discipline didn't yield such positive outcomes as psychological distress. The implement of "white torture," which we started three months ago, finally turned Four unresponsive, nearly catatonic to people and the surrounding environment. We converted the Subject's cell, clothes, and even food to be entirely white. Guards now wear all white, lights are kept on twenty-four hours a day, and no words are spoken. No other color is seen.*

*While the physical pain of sensory deprivation is minimal compared to other methods we have used in the past, the psychological repercussions are substantial. The Subject must be broken, his mind wiped out, made a white canvas, ready to be molded as we please. Four's present state suggests we can finally make some progress.*

*Nevertheless, if the Subject's weak and fearful nature is still present after our countless attempts to eradicate it, perhaps we need to face the fact that Four is not qualified for this experiment.*

*The Subject's elimination might be inevitable, same as Subject One.*

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# *one*

## SARIEL

PRESENT DAY

“Did you use sunscreen? The one I sent you the link to. Don’t want you to turn into a roasted kebab.” Lori adjusts the strap of his purse on his shoulder as we walk down one of the sidewalks near Lincoln Park. The grayish blanket of snow is covering most of the asphalt making the sole of my boots crunch with every step I take. I pull up the collar of my coat; it’s a sunny day, but we are still in the middle of winter.

“I forgot to apply it today,” I confess.

“Even your bros haven’t killed as many people as melanoma. Isn’t that reason enough to use sunscreen, Angel?”

My lips curl at Lori’s *Loriness*. I look down at my pearl white fingernails. We just finished a mani-pedi session. Lori insisted I needed some out-of-the-lab time—which I allow myself regularly to attend Lori’s yoga classes. Today that class morphed into “brunch and drunk,” as Rami called it. That’s why I’m carrying a bag filled with hand creams and nail polishes to the diner where some of my brothers are waiting.

I spot a woman pushing a baby stroller coming our way. The dog on her leash is so comically cute. Its fur is white as a cloud, has a flat nose, big bat ears, and short legs. I crouch down as it starts pulling excitedly on the leash while panting and gasping with his brown eyes focused on me.

The woman stops with a smile as her dog happily greets me, licking and sniffing my hand. After a few moments, her kid in the stroller starts crying.

“Oh, is it my fault? I’m sorry,” I tell her, giving my furry friend a last pat before straightening up. My braid falls heavily on my shoulder, and I flick it behind my back.

She doesn’t have time to answer me as her child’s cry abruptly halts. The kid is staring at Lori now, seemingly taken aback by my friend’s appearance. Big, soft curls frame his face, red lips are in a pout, and the green cat-eye sunglasses look very cute on him.

Lori is looking with a raised eyebrow at the child now picking his nose. “He’s…charming,” he states with sarcasm.

“*She*…likes you, perhaps.” The mother touches the pink bow on the child’s head as to emphasize Lori’s mistake.

“She?” My friend sounds *too* baffled.

“What?” She glares at him.

“Lori?” I try hesitantly.

“I can give you the name of my esthetician. She can surely help with those bushy brows and mustache.”

The mother makes a growly sound, looking like she is hyperventilating. Her cheeks have turned red and the expression on her face is appalled.

Lori bends down to have a one-on-one with the child, not in the least sorry or intimidated by the woman. “Oh well, kiddo, looks don’t matter. Study hard, and you’ll turn into my dear friend Sari here. Alone and overworked.”

*Really?* I shake my head at him.

“My daughter is beautiful!” Oh, I’ve seen that same murderous, protective look in all my brothers’ eyes, too many times to count.

“Sure. Sure. My friend here thinks his inside-out hamster is beautiful too.” As soon as the last insult leaves Lori’s mouth, I grab his shoulders and push him away from the woman.

“We are sorry,” I tell her before dragging Lori away.

He tries to turn around, but I keep yanking him toward the diner.

“What?” He huffs. “You wanted me to lie to her?”

“No. Just avoid talking next time.”

“I can’t; my mouth is an independent being, the bitchy, slutty kind.”

I snort. “Stop making me laugh. You’re not being fair.”

“Your face is not fair.” He laces his arm with mine, another fake pout on his lips.

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Not everything does. Sometimes I hate being an adult,” he mutters.

“Because you’re not one.” I give him a little smirk. “You’re a… What does Rami call you?” I search my memories, trying to remember.

“Gremlin? Unhinged squirrel? Satan’s pet?”

I can’t stifle a laugh. Lori is a mischievous force of nature. “Oh, the sass master!”

“I don’t have the faintest idea where that comes from,” he feigns ignorance. “But me likey. Sass master.” He repeats the nickname a couple of times, as if he enjoys the sound of it. I don’t think my brother thought of it as a compliment, though.

“And Albert E. is a hairless guinea pig, not a hamster,” I remind him about my pet.

“He still looks inside out,” Lori retorts unapologetically. It doesn’t matter, because Albert E. is the cutest in my eyes.

I look at the diner’s red doors across the street; the sign reading Marnie’s looks discolored.

“Couldn’t we have gone to a spa? I’m in need of a sauna. I have toxins to sweat out,” he complains.

“You can’t sweat out toxins. Sweating can actually cause your kidneys to retain water, preventing your body from eliminating toxins.”

“So I’ve been following another new age crapola. Fantastic.”

The bell above the door announces our arrival as I push one door open and take a step inside the diner.

Marnie’s is a throwback to the last century, with Formica tables, vinyl chairs and booths, and the smell of greasy but delicious dishes filling the air. I instantly love it. A big-haired middle-aged woman is behind the counter wearing a light blue waitress uniform with a white apron tied around her generous hips.

The place is empty except two tables—one of which is occupied by Michael, Ollie, and Rami.

The waitress doesn’t look up from the magazine she’s reading as she says, “Sit anywhere; I’ll be with you in a sec.”

I follow Lori making our way to the others, and as we pass by another table, I overhear part of the conversation the two people sitting there are having.

“It’s only been two months since she dumped you,” the woman is saying to her friend.

“Well, I haven’t had sex in months. I’m so pent up. Can I even remember how is it done?” the guy replies, all grumbly.

I swallow hard thinking about my situation and am so lost in my thoughts, I almost hit Lori’s back as he stops near their table.

“Don’t worry. It’s like riding a bicycle—only you are panty-less and there’s no seat…or actual pedals.” He pats the shocked guy’s shoulder before resuming his steps.

I bite my lower lip, and with my eyes focused on the floor, I reach the others—I don’t dare look at the other two customers.

“Finally out of that lab!” Rami exclaims, standing up.

“We missed you.” Ollie pushes his chair back and tries to give me a quick hug, which turns into a bear one when Rami wraps his beefy body around both of us. I don’t mind it. I actually like this new side of him—compared to his untouchable former self. His boyfriend Hunter literally saved him from a disconnected existence.

Michael waves at me; I see him plenty lately. He’s been coming to the labs to work with me since he’s a hematologist—and to be with Raph, his husband and my brother who is the president of Bear-Stone Labs, our research company. He used to be a medical examiner and now is a professor of forensic pathology, anatomy, toxicology, forensic science, and more at the University of Illinois in Chicago.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Lori sniffs haughtily, dropping down on one of the chairs as they let me go.

I feel my cheeks tighten with a smile. I’ve missed this…lightness. Since Meg, my foster mother, fell into a coma, everything has seemed to be falling apart. I’ve been trying to find a way to get her back. She was poisoned with cyanide, which is often fatal. The fact that she’s still alive is a miracle. The doctors administered intravenously sodium thiosulfate in combination with sodium nitrite to get rid of the poison—the exact doses I instructed since I was the one who discovered what happened to her. But was I too late? Those agents seem to have worked, but since Meg also has lupus, her body was weak to begin with. She won’t wake up. After all the endless hours and effort Michael and I put in, her body is still unmoved at the hospital. And I don’t know the reason. I can only make suppositions, and none of them have a concrete solution.

My world is science. The systematic approach, the logical reasoning, the empirical evidence, and the testable hypothesis. The lab is my home, with its immaculate surfaces, specialized equipment, and methodical order. Until recently, I always found answers within my reign. Because I solely focused on my work, everything came as a distant second. I couldn’t be bothered with mundane things. I’ve been working my ass off since…always, studying disease, chasing cures, doing my part just like my brothers do, only in my own way.

People call me a genius, the Good Will Hunting of research. But what's the point of being so smart if I can't help the one person I owe my life to?

I'm nervously biting my inner cheek, tasting blood when the waitress approaches our table.

"Doc! Long time no see," she addresses Michael. He used to come here with Meg, that's how we found out about his existence—long story.

"Bringing all this hot testosterone here… Want me to swoon like a blushing virgin?" The waitress dramatically fans her face with the notepad.

"Berta my dear, you are such a flatterer." Michael smiles at her.

"And please keep going," Lori adds, winking at her.

She replies with a flying kiss. "What can I get you all?"

"I think it's mimosa o-clock." Everybody nods at Rami's statement, so I do too, even though I'm not sure what a mimosa is. Judging by the context, it must be a drink or a dish.

"And pie. So many choices," Ollie states, looking down at the menu.

"Take your time. I'll get your mimosas first." She leaves.

"Meg loves this place."

"Yeah," Ollie agrees with Michael. A few seconds of silence pass. "I need to go visit her again."

"Linda doesn't leave her side much," Lori states. If my romantic partner was unresponsive in a hospital bed, I'd be by their side too, no matter what. If I had one, that is.

"She…hopes," Michael whispers.

"We all do," Rami adds.

I ball up my hands under the table. I feel like I'm letting everybody down. How can I not see what's wrong?

“How’s your Magnum PI boo?” Lori suddenly asks Rami. He’s trying to lighten the mood, but I can see his eyes are glassy.

“Gorgeous. Sexy. Mine.” Rami has a dreamy expression on his face now. He’s utterly smitten with his boyfriend. I envy him.

“Tell me is it true that ‘when you go black, you never *walk straight* back’?” Lori smirks at him.

“You are in a relationship with a droid and his sicko alter ego, you should be the one questioned.” He’s talking about Lori’s fiancé Gabe, who has multiplicity.

“Don’t you wish to know, wank face.”

I stare at the fruit pie menu, suddenly remembering how dissatisfying my last date was. I can’t stifle my sigh.

Lori turns my way. “Okay. What’s wrong, Angel? You’ve been huffing all morning, all the way through each finger and toenail. Even that amazing shoulder massage the tall giraffe lady gave you didn’t help your mood.”

“You got a mani-pedi without me?” Ollie clips at him. They’ve known each other since they were kids. When Ollie fell in love with my brother Rague, his brother Sully and Lori became part of our extended family as well. Then Lori got together with my other brother, Gabe.

Our unconventional family keeps growing.

“The coupon was for two, and as you can see, Angel is in dear need of some relaxation time!” Lori clarifies; his light brown curls shake lightly as he sniffs.

“Like I need a coupon,” Ollie mutters, green eyes glaring at Lori. He’s right since Rague is a millionaire—our family is very wealthy on top of dysfunctional.

I give him a small apologetic smile. “I didn’t know you wanted to go; I’d have given you my coupon.”

“I know you would.” He doesn’t look angry at me, only Lori.

“Let’s have a chin wag, eh?” Lori taps his elbow against mine.

“Uhm?”

“A chat,” Ollie explains. Lori’s grandma, who raised him, was from the UK, so he mixes British slang with his Chicago way of talking. I got used to it, but sometimes I still can’t understand what he means.

The waitress saves me from answering, bringing over glasses and a pitcher filled with a yellow drink.

As soon as Rami pours some for me I take a fortifying sip.

When I look up, they’re all staring at me. “No need for a chat.”

“You might as well have a neon sign on your head saying ‘*I’m down as a windless flag*,’” Rami states.

“Is it because of the stalker?” Michael frowns.

I actually forgot about that for a moment. Having a stalker is kind of scary, but there’re too many things going on at once in my life right now. I barely have time to think about it.

“That fucker! I’m so bloody irritated, since we have bugger all!”

“We have fuck all,” Ollie translates Lori’s words for me once again.

Rami puts his heavy arm around my shoulders. He’s as tall as me but four times my size with all those muscles he sports. The sweater he’s wearing looks like it’s about to burst over his mountainous pecs. “We’ll get him, no worries.”

I nod and look down at the table, focusing on the long deep scratch marring the surface. My fingers pull at my long braid; the light sting makes my belly tingle.

“Would a hug make you feel better?” Rami tightens his arm before letting his hand glide up and down my back.

“Stop feeling your brother up!” Lori exclaims a little too loudly, making the people from the other table turn toward us.

“I’m not, you jezebel!”

“When you rub someone’s back it increases blood flow, so hugs are actually good,” I let Lori know.

“See?” Rami sniffs at him.

“I’m a little uneasy about the stalker, but that’s not…” I let the sentence die.

“Tell Papa Lori everything.” His insistence is nothing new. Lately he seems to be very interested in my dating life.

The midday sun is at its highest point in the sky, peeking behind the buildings, shadows stretching on the old floor of the diner.

“Just…I think I’m unlucky with men,” I confess.

Lori pats my hand. “Every pot has a lid, Gran used to say.”

“Yeah.” Ollie nods.

“I can’t even check if the lids fit. They don’t give me the chance.” I sigh dejectedly again.

“What do you mean?” Ollie asks.

“One guy moved to another city after one date. The next one went to the restaurant bathroom and never came back. Another got a text and ran away without any explanation.”

Do I repel men? Maybe I’m boring, too oblivious of the norms of intimacy. I can’t quite catch those double entendres people exchange, and I don’t know how to flirt. Keeping a conversation with one person is hard for me.

Rami and the others are not saying anything, but I can see the level of anger and unhappiness on their faces.

“The last guy took me to his place to give me back my scarf, and it was nice…until the fire alarm went off. He’s not answering my texts now.”

“Mm,” Lori makes a pondering sound. “Were you playing tonsil tennis before the alarm?”

“Tennis?” Why is he talking about sports now?

“Kissing, Angel.”

*Ohhhh.* “A little.” My cheeks heat remembering the way Jonathan’s lips brushed over my mouth and his tongue met mine.

“Did he stroke the kitty?” Ollie purrs.

“Donut holes are sacrosanct,” Rami adds.

“Amen,” Michael agrees.

“I-I love donuts, but what does that have to do with kissing?” I’m confused again.

“So sweet.” Ollie smiles at me.

“People love him so much that if he slapped them in the face, they’d kiss that hand in gratitude.” Lori’s absurd statement makes my eyebrows lift.

“That’s just sick, but so very true,” Rami says. They are all looking at me with googly eyes now.

I shake my head. “Look, we barely kissed; he seemed…distracted.” Or maybe *I* was the one thinking about someone else’s lips on me, sucking tenderly at first then roughly… Crap.

“Distracted? The arsehole must have had a full plate! Perhaps you were his Wednesday fuck,” Lori suggests.

“Wednesday?” Michael raises a blond eyebrow at him.

“Was it Tuesday? Monday? Choose a day of the week.”

“You mean a side fuck,” Michael states. Rami snorts.

“That happened to you?” Ollie asks Lori.

“Once. I made him pay *every day* of the week.” His wicked smirk is kind of creepy.

“Side fuck or not, distracted is not good,” Michael tells me. “You need someone to go all feral on your ass. A possessive, obsessed, OTT stud who

gives you a dose of dick to get by."

"What the heck, Bones! My boyfriend is not even here, and I'm sporting a boner," Lori grumbles.

"Gross! What are you, a teen hitting puberty?"

"It could be a random erection. It's caused by fluctuations in hormones, such as testosterone, and is a sign of healthy sexual function." It's my turn to pat Lori's hand to reassure him.

"Don't know why, but the thought of random erections makes me even harder," he lets me know.

"Lor, shut it. Sari, what you need is to be careful of the bad dick curse," Ollie states.

"What's that?" Rami downs his mimosa before starting to fill all the glasses on the table again.

This juice is pretty good; it has a sharp aftertaste. It slides down my throat so smoothly.

"A double jerk of a dick outside the bed, while in bed too good a dick; hard to let him go."

"Been there done that." Rami snorts, and Lori nods.

Michael giggles. "Kind of like a dèjà vu-oodu for me!"

"Dèjà vu is nothing but the frontal regions of the brain attempting to correct an inaccurate memory." My mouth can't seem to stop moving, my thoughts just fly out, how weird. I finish my glass.

"You're barfing Wikipedia all over us to avoid giving more details of the distracted prick." Lori pouts at me. He's so pretty. I wish I was as tiny as him.

"Wikipedia is 85% inaccurate," I counter.

"Will you tell me more if I share, too? Sort of a vicarious thrill? Because Gabe let me tie him up yesterday, and the dirty things I did to him…they

weren’t even the best part. It was when Bez tore those cuffs like a herculean demigod and—”

“Stop!” Michael exclaims. “Keep your men’s sex escapades for yourself at least for an hour.”

“What? I like a firm hand in the bedroom.” Lori tsks.

“Firmly gagging you,” Rami mutters, but we all hear him. This conversation is making me squirm on my chair.

“Sod the both of you!”

“Maybe I need to be more seductive?” I hazard. Did I say that out loud?

Ollie seems to agree with me. “Everybody has a small Marilyn inside.”

“Monroe or Manson?” Rami asks with a pensive look on his face.

Lori taps his fingers on his chin. “Can it be both?”

“Your Manson is overtaking the Monroe lately,” Ollie snaps at him.

“Awww, you think so?”

“That wasn’t a compl—never mind. Just be yourself, Sari,” Ollie encourages me.

“Lovely. It makes me want to poke my eyes out. Worst advice ever given.” Lori sniffs.

“Then what?” Michael asks him.

It takes Lori a few seconds to reply. “This is going to come back to bite me later, but I can’t keep my mouth shut.”

Rami snorts. “Like you even try, Gremlin.”

“Thank you Doctor Reacher, where did you get that degree in psychology?”

“Same place where you took yours in sarcasm,” Rami counters back.

“So what’s your advice?” I interject. I’m curious.

“You have genius mojo; use it.”

“I don’t think people are turned on by geniuses. Most get weirded out.”

“Actually, I’m turned on by Raph’s brain, and sometimes I imagine it naked. All those neurons and glial cells. So hot!” I frown at Michael’s excitement. I love the sight of a brain, but I’ve never been attracted to one.

“Sure. Sure,” Lori agrees. “Gabe can be very sexy when he shows his knowledge and skills. The desk in his office has been seeing a lot of action because of that, the window wall too, any wall. The sofas, coffee table, book shelves, bathroom sink—”

Ollie waves his hand to make him stop. “Ugh. We get it, you nympho!”

“Says the exhibitionist! If dogging was a sport, you’d get first place.” Lori and Ollie start bantering.

“Hunter can’t keep his hands off me when I talk hacking,” Rami lets me know.

Why is it so hard to find someone for me? Is it because of…Uri? But I already decided to move on from my eternal crush a few months ago, hence dating. It’s not that easy, though, when I see him every day since he’s my… foster brother.

“Is it Rague?” Rami asks Ollie who’s looking at his phone. “Are they coming?”

“Yeah. Hunter and Uri left already.”

Only hearing his name creates a warmth of excitement inside my belly. It’s not good.

“Are you sexting now? Kinky!” Lori taunts Ollie, earning a flipped finger.

“Butt out, perv Papa Lori!”

“Butt, eh!” Rami laughs, and I feel a strange lightheadedness as I giggle at his joke.

“Raph is coming too,” Michael declares, putting away his phone. Of course he is. He can’t stay too long away from his husband.

“Mademoiselle,” Lori calls the waitress. “Two more pitchers of mimosas please, and a few more glasses.”

“And a slice of each pie on the menu,” Rami orders.

“That sounds great. I couldn’t make up my mind,” I tell him happily.

“Oh, Sully is calling!” Ollie exclaims happily before answering his brother’s call.

“Beautiful.” Michael is looking down at Lori’s pink leather bag.

“My Chanel Hobo is gorgeous, right? Gabe’s gift. My men know how to keep me happy.” He suddenly jumps in his chair as he grabs my forearm. “What about the custom-made lingerie online shop I told you about?”

“Fly on Honey,” I say remembering the name.

“Yes! The owner is a sweetie. I chat with him from time to time. Did you check his pieces? They’re to die for.”

Lori grabs his phone from his bag and swiftly taps on the screen, moving closer to me to let Rami—who is seated on my other side—see as well.

“This blue corset with the garter belt looks amazing. Grizzly loves to look at my body in lace.”

“What about feeling the fabric and testing the drape?” I ask Lori. He’s dragged me to more than a few shops around Chicago with that statement in the past.

“Don’t go frugal, go big. You can buy from both physical and online shops.”

“He can sew your boo’s name on your ass! I mean that could earn you a pounding.” Rami gives me a suggestive look that makes my cheeks warm. The phrase *blush like a virgin* can be literal in my case. Twenty-five, and still I haven’t gone beyond third base.

The air surrounding me suddenly changes, charged with electricity. The doors open, and Uri walks in—followed by Hunter, Gabe, and Raph.

His eyes move around the room, I only let go of my breath when they find me, his stare always so intense. He starts prowling toward us—this is definitely the word for how he moves. Slowly, purposefully, and confidently. His tall build stands out, sculpted from constant swim training and very malicious intent. His long caramel dreads swing with every step he takes. His ears sport multiple piercings as do his lower lip and eyebrow. He's wearing a blue shirt, the top two buttons undone, showing some smooth skin, an open cardigan, and a warm-looking sherpa denim jacket. The dark jeans covering his long legs look well-worn, in contrast with the pair of pristine black boots. Uri likes to follow fashion trends and make them his. As a result, he's always cool, slick, and stylish.

He seems approachable due to his easy way of smiling—although it can turn terrifying in a heartbeat. But the truth is that he is the most closed-off person I know, and I'm including my brother Gabe in the list.

He's been my best friend for seventeen years. I know everything about him. Or at least, I was sure I did. That thought brings a little lip tremor with it. Our relationship has always been a little too intense, without enough boundaries. My attachment to Uri is complex. It developed with time, creating layers of multiple kinds of love and need. I used to see him as someone to look up to, someone to go to when in need. That sentiment morphed into something different as we grew up. Which made me feel off balance and embarrassed, considering the fact that Uri never showed interest in me, not in the way I wanted. I'm special to him, like a precious possession would be—since a sociopath can't feel love. There's no attraction on his part, though.

So, I tried to put some distance between us—not easy when he's part of my family—and then the truth about him having a biological brother came out. Our relationship is a mess of epic proportions now. For me at least. Pushing him away was the best option. And yet, I'm incapable of not feeling happy whenever he's near me, despite all the confusion and anguish he creates whenever he's close. He's ineluctable. Impossible to fight or pull away from. Maybe because this—not only physical—distance between us feels foreign to me. I'm used to having him around all the time. The near absence of boundaries was caused by his sociopathic nature but also by my inability

to say no to him. The absence of firm definitions of our respective roles, though, that's all Uri.

At the end of the day, ending that kind of codependent relationship was a good decision. Even though there's still a part of me that feels perpetually cold without him.

*Is a little of him better than a lot of nothing?* I'm not sure.

"Super Model is here," Lori teases Uri. "Does that mean we have to stop having a blast talking smack about him?"

Uri reaches the table. His eyes remain firmly on my face as he replies, "Lori, you're like a human boomerang, always coming back with more shit."

"My Grizzly!" Rami's exclamation takes my attention away from them. He greets Hunter with a kiss, a bit too *French* for a public place.

"Little Wasp." As soon as he hears his nickname, Lori jumps and runs to Bez. Uri swiftly takes the chair next to me. His arm falls on the back of my chair, fingers playing with the end of my braid. I suck in a breath. Why am I always so aware of him?

Ollie finally hangs up his phone.

"How is Sully?" I ask, trying hard to distract myself.

"Preparing to move to college. He looks okay. I'm the one apprehensive as fuck."

"But it was his decision to live on campus, right?" Michael asks as he sits on Raph's lap. Seeing my brother so possessive of someone else always makes me smile. Raph and I were the only ones legally adopted by Meg and Linda because we had no relatives alive. We lived only the two of us in Meg's huge house for roughly six months before the others moved in with us from the group home. We also started Bear-Stone Labs together from scratch. He's the second brother I've shared most of my life with. The first will always be Uri, even though I have never really thought of him as a brother. How could I ever have these kinds of…reactions to a brother?

Ollie nods. “The therapist said it will do Sully good to leave his comfort zone and go be with people his own age.”

Lori steps behind him and grabs his shoulders. “We will all check on him, right, Reacher?” Lori looks at Rami. He has funny nicknames for all of us. He calls me Angel… If he only knew the dark desires I keep inside.

“Yes,” Rami tries to reassure Ollie. “Serena is on it. Don’t worry.”

“I know. It’s just…it’s been so hard for him since he was taken and…” Ollie still feels guilty about his brother’s kidnapping. It almost broke both of them.

“We know. But Sully-doo is a fighter, strong and resilient,” Michael reminds him.

“Ren is going to the same college.” Raph looks at Hunter. Ren is one of the triplet boys who live with him and Rami.

“Yeah, he’s trying a few classes. He’ll help Sully out.”

“They’re both studying veterinary medicine, and they’re already chummy chums. Experiencing college will be good for Sully-doo. I can attest to that,” Lori adds. He’s studying to become a lawyer, since his paralegal work at Gabe’s law firm doesn’t satisfy him anymore.

“Dare can help to keep an eye on him as well. He’s become my mini-me hacker, working for Hunter’s PI agency.” Rami takes a sip of mimosa.

“Does he cover his junk in lace, too?” Lori smirks shamelessly.

The spray of mimosa couldn’t be better aimed, and I gasp as I witness the scene unfurling in front of me. Rami turns his head as the drink spews from his mouth, hitting Gabe, who is standing on his right. He coughs hard as he bends over to catch his breath while Hunter pats his back.

“Are you on glue?” Rami coughs out. “Making me think about Dare like that!”

“Quit your bellyaching nonsense,” Bez grumbles, looking down at the wet spot on his suit. I’m not sure who he is talking to.

“Better being the one to spit than being soaked in someone else’s saliva.” Gabe is wiping himself with one of the napkins from the table, trying to get the combination of spit and mimosa off his suit—while Bez growls furiously.

“Well, I’m more of a *swallower* than a spitter.” Lori winks at him. Then he grabs his suit lapels and pushes himself on the tips of his toes. His face is still far from Gabe/Bez’s since he’s tiny compared to them. “Need me to remind you?”

I hear Rami muttering, “I wish I was a fly.”

“Ugh,” Ollie elbows him with a disgusted face.

“Training a few would be great. Flies would make great detectives,” Hunter states. He is so big and handsome.

“They already are. The first recorded use of flies in a criminal investigation was in 13th-century China. By studying the fly population and their larval stages at a crime scene, the buzzing creatures help forensic scientists estimate the time of death.” Michael is addressing us like he would in one of his college classes. They’re always filled with students. He’s a great teacher.

I add, “The species most helpful in forensic investigations are house flies, blow flies, and flesh flies.”

“I want to say wow, but I’m going to say eww.” Lori scratches his nose as he turns toward the table, wrapped in Gabe/Bez’s arms.

“Talking about investigations.” Hunter sets on the table a transparent plastic bag with a pair of blue panties and a letter inside. They were in a package sent to the lab with my name on it.

I cringe at the sight of them. The love letter is quite disturbing, since the person professes his undying love to me, talking about belonging together and fated mates—which I don’t really understand. It wasn’t handwritten, instead they used an old typewriter.

“The only fingerprints we found are from the postman and a couple of people working at the post office,” Rami states.

“They were all clean. The stamp has no trace of DNA,” Hunter adds. “The letter as well, and also the underwear.”

“No joy, then.” Lori looks my way. “ Are those panties yours?” He points at the lacy underwear inside the plastic bag.

Uri’s body tenses while his fingers tighten on my side. Words get stuck inside my throat, so I shake my head, wiggling slightly on my chair.

“That would’ve implied that this shithead broke into and entered Sari’s place to steal his underwear.” Raph lets out an incredulous sniff.

“Rami installed Serena as a security alarm in all our houses. It’s impossible for anybody to get past her undetected,” Ollie declares.

“Unless that someone is Uri’s biological brother. He did get inside his property. Could the stalker be him?” Gabe’s monotone voice doesn’t take away the seriousness of his question.

“It’s not him,” Uri hisses. His fist on the table flexes, turning his knuckles white. Is he defending him? He looks angry.

“Whoever it is, we will stop him. You can never be alone, Sari. Someone always has to be with you.” I nod as Rami’s arm wraps protectively around my shoulder for a moment until Uri unceremoniously shoves it off, pulling me tightly against him. A shiver rolls down my spine, and he tucks me even more closely to him, probably misreading the trembling of my body. I’m a little creeped out by this stalker who seems obsessed with me, but it’s Uri’s nearness that caused my body’s uncontrollable reaction.

“How do you know it wasn’t your biological brother sending me the package?” I ask Uri.

I slowly turn in his hold, and he allows it, his large palm sliding against my waist as I face him. He’s so good-looking. Those full, masculine lips so close. A soft rumbling comes from him; I feel the vibration against my chest more than hear it. Without giving it thought and feeling strangely bolder than usual, I lift my hand and place it on his heart over his shirt as I tilt my head up to look into his eyes. The depth of those light ginger pools… My breath gets stuck inside my lungs once again.

“I know it wasn’t him,” he whispers without clarifying further. Because he doesn’t feel the need to. The sting makes me lower my gaze, reminding me once again why I created some distance between us.

There is no missing the slight vibration under my fingers as he growls once again.

“I’ll give this prick free neutering as soon as he shows his face. I’ll run his balls over with my car. It might not kill him, but I bet it would hurt like hell. Especially since I’m willing to throw it in reverse and do it a second time.” Lori pauses. “Or ten more times. Whatever it takes.”

“Nobody wants to see you behind a wheel ever again,” Gabe states, making his fiancée push his head all the way back to glare up at him. Gabe answers with a peck on his nose. I’m still getting accustomed to seeing this affectionate side of him.

The waitress comes, bringing plates filled with pie. After a couple of teasing comments aimed at the newcomers, she leaves, and Gabe and Lori finally sit at the table between Uri and Michael, who is still sitting on Raph’s lap.

Ollie pushes a slice of chestnut pie toward me. I give him a forced smile. I’m about to slide the plate my way when Uri grabs it.

“Hey! It was for Sari,” Ollie complains.

Uri shrugs, putting a fork of chestnut pie in his mouth, as Rami says, “Sari doesn’t like chestnuts, right?”

I nod hesitantly.

“Oh!” Ollie’s eyes widen as he understands Uri’s action.

“He likes them, but they give him indigestion,” Uri clarifies, setting what looks like a slice of apple pie in front of me. He knows me so well, knows I can’t say no when offered something, so he took the choice off my hands. I would’ve ended up in bed with a stomachache if he hadn’t intervened.

My heart speeds up at his attentiveness. It usually beats faster when he’s near me, and then gradually calms down when he leaves. It feels like it’s

constantly waiting for him, waiting to swell, to overflow with desperate, hopeless want. A seemingly never-ending agony. *To which I decided to put an end to,* I remind myself.

A self-derisive snort leaves my lips as I put a hand over my mouth to avoid spraying apple pie all over the table. I grab my glass and down it to wash away the crumbles.

“How many did you drink?” Uri asks me.

“Three or four.” When I see his gaze darkening, like he would to scold a kid, I clip, “It’s juice!”

“Mixed with alcohol,” Raph adds.

Oh! “Really? That’s why I feel so nice and…loose.” I giggle, enjoying how relaxed my muscles are feeling.

“Keep drinking then,” Hunter suggests. His dark eyes are looking at me teasingly while his hand is scratching the short stubble covering his cheeks.

I feel Uri stiffening near me, but I ignore him and smile at Rami as he fills my glass again. My phone beeping stops me from enjoying my drink. I grab it out of my coat and see a text from Trent.

“Who is it?” Uri asks, always the curious one. Ready to protect me from everyone and everything.

“A colleague.” He’s actually Michael’s colleague, a professor at the same university. And technically we went out on a couple of dates. We also kissed and jerked each other off. It was going okay until Meg ended up at the hospital, and I got sucked up by…everything. We lost contact after a few weeks of not seeing each other. Then he moved to another city. The fact that I didn’t miss him much spoke volumes. Why is he texting me now?

“Which colleague?” Uri insists.

“None of your business,” I reply firmly, while reading the message. Trent heard about the lecture I’ll give at his university in a couple of weeks about medical treatment studies**,** new therapies and approaches, and wants to meet up.

I reply with a quick text and then pocket my phone again.

I glance at Uri, noticing how the corner of his mouth has dropped by half an inch, which tells me he's upset.

"Everything about you is my business." His gravelly tone confirms what I already know.

How many times have I wished those words were uttered in a romantic, possessive way and not in a brotherly protective one? How irritatingly disappointing.

"Well, since you keep things from me, I'll do just the same."

"No, you won't." His voice deepens. Some of the people at the table frown. He must notice too, but his tone doesn't soften. "I won't let you."

His forceful statement annoys me even further. "You have a biological brother, Uri. You've been looking for him for years, and you never told me or anybody else here about it!" My voice rises the more I speak. Reminding myself I'm in a public place, I add in a lower tone, "I think it's only fair that I keep a few things to myself."

"Angel is right. Your bro is a probable maniac, and you didn't warn us about him." Lori's acrimonious words and the look of agreement from the rest of the bros make me wince. *I didn't mean to start an argument.*

"This is a private conversation," Uri hisses.

"It bloody isn't." My pleading eyes meet Lori's, and he adds reluctantly. "But okay. We are not here." He crosses his fingers over his mouth for a moment in a silent gesture.

"Fuck off, Gremlin!"

Bez's threatening snarl makes my hair stand. "Careful, Uriel."

"Tell your fiancé to mind his own fucking business." Uri doesn't seem to care about Bez's wrath. On the contrary, when we were young, he actually tried multiple times to anger Gabe so that his alter, Bez, would come out to defend him. He found Gabe's multiplicity fascinating.

“You really think he’ll listen?” Gabe utters in his usual flat tone.

“Make him,” Uri responds.

“The fiancé is right bloody here and can hear everything you daft pricks are saying,” Lori barks.

“Go talk somewhere private if you don’t want people to interfere,” Raph states coldly before landing a kiss on Michael’s head. Uri almost bears his teeth at his brother before pulling me up by the arm and dragging me toward the exit.

I reluctantly let him have his way, only because I don’t want to cause another fight. Lately, Uri is more belligerent, easily irked by anything.

“I’ll use you as a swizzle stick if you talk to me like that again.” Lori’s threat makes Uri halt.

I quickly plaster my body against his back and place my hand over his mouth to prevent him from insulting Lori while pushing him forward. It’s not easy since he’s bigger than me, but he resumes walking as he covers my hand with his. I have to grab the front of his shirt as my feet hit the back of his, making me stumble. We finally get out. Uri stops under the awning of the closed shop next door and then spins around until we are facing each other. His hand is still on mine over his mouth. The other flattens on the wall near my head. His long dreads brush his wide shoulders, and his gorgeous hazel-gold eyes seem to sparkle as I almost drown into their depths.

The number of ways to describe him is overflowing my brain. My protector. My best friend. My safe place. My first crush. My earliest morning thought and last nightly dream.

I suddenly feel something wet gliding over my palm, right over the scar I got many years ago the day I solidified the unbreakable blood pact with my brothers. His breath is warm under my hand while his tongue comes out to lick the long pink line once again. I gasp, remembering a few weeks back, the night when he cleaned the blood off my lip, his mouth enveloped my plump flesh, his long, pierced tongue sliding painfully slow. It had been brief and in front of my brothers, but everything Uri does latches onto me,

and I can never stop replaying it in my head. Lori called it a suck-a-lip kiss. I honestly don't think it was a kiss. I didn't register it properly, though. I was too shocked and too high on the pain from the slap the guy who'd tried to kidnap Lori had given me. Hence the bloody lip.

Uri's tongue moves again against my skin, I can feel the coldness of the barbell piercing rubbing there. It starts a tingling sensation from my palm up the whole length of my arm. It's always like this with him. He crosses over the boundaries of our relationship, though remaining firmly near the edge. Like an unmovable force. A permanent fixture in my life. Constant. Immutable.

But something did change—for me—and I can't go on like this. I can't stop feeling hurt by his unwillingness to confide in me. I could ask about his biological brother again, but Uri's tense frame and deepening frown every time I mention it does not speak of a person who wants to talk.

He's caging me against the wall. The January air is cold around us, but his body radiates all the heat I need. His sandalwood scent fills my lungs, replacing the urban winter mix of exhaust fumes, coffee, and wet asphalt.

I've always liked our height difference. Gazing up at him allows me to see the slender line of his throat, the contrast of his large shoulders to his trim waist, the lines of his high cheekbones, the curve of his succulent lips, the way his hairline frames his forehead, and how his ears stick out slightly. From down here, Uri looks like a Greek god, kissed by the sun, filled with vigor and vitality.

He finally pushes my hand away from his mouth but keeps his hold on it, pressing it to the wall. Palm to palm. Scar to scar. His fingers are long and strong around mine.

"Baby Blue." He only calls me that when we are alone. The nickname has always made me cave in the past—and he knows it. It reminds me of that day many years ago, the first time I saw him, standing in a field of Baby Blue Eyes wildflowers.

"Who. The fuck. Is that colleague?" Uri's demand shakes the haziness off me.

I won’t bend to him. I don’t want to. “Stop sticking your nose in my life, Uri!”

He pushes his hard body against mine in response. I can feel his torso rising and falling, his heart beating over mine. If he moves one more inch his groin would touch my belly. I close my eyes and let the inappropriate thoughts form as I start panting. His hand tightens around mine, and the slight sting makes me want to purr like an eager cat. *More*. My head is screaming to stop, but my body won’t listen to it. Every cell is awakened, waiting. Craving.

“That will never happen,” he growls; I feel the rumble of his voice penetrating my skin and reaching down to my bones.

I open my eyes when I feel his breath over my cheek. He’s so close now. A part of me called inner hopeless dumbass still hopes he’ll lower his head and kiss me. His nostrils are flaring, burning gaze studying me. His beard is just barely long enough to be called one, but I wonder how it would feel against my skin.

When nothing happens after a minute, I swallow the bitter disappointment once again and turn my head to the right, avoiding his dark, piercing gaze.

“What do you want from me?” I whisper. W*hy does he keep doing this to me?*

“You still don’t know?” The piercing rises with his eyebrow.

I grit my teeth. “Know? You are the one who kept me in the dark about everything. Don’t you trust me?”

“You didn’t need to know. It was for your own protection.”

*Didn’t need to know?* “I’m not weak. I’m not your defenseless little brother anymore!” I clip.

“Brother?” His bitter laugh sounds even more menacing accompanied by the wicked intentions I think I see glimmering in those deep eyes. His hand leaves the wall, and I tremble all over fantasizing about the feeling of it around my neck. But I’m wrong. His fingers land on the zipper of my white cashmere sweater, starting to drag it up.

Such a small thing, such a Uri thing to do. Always so attentive toward me, it usually makes me smile. I swallow my one-sided desire and let my head touch the wall behind me as I try to stop the roaring thoughts inside it. Sometimes I wish he could actually read them just to put a solid end to this unrequited love. He could shift through them, find the root, and eradicate it all, because I sure as hell can't.

"It seems I've been too lenient with you."

The heaviness of his gaze, that one hundred percent intensity he focuses on me is unnerving on top of exciting right now. It takes a moment, a long one, for me to focus on his words rather than the large, firm lips producing them. My brain gets all slow and weird when he is too close to me.

I frown at his following statement, feeling a sting between my eyes. "Trying to push me away is futile, Baby Blue."

His controlling behavior and overprotectiveness are clear sociopathic traits. They aren't brought out by love or affection. I'm one of his precious possessions, like his guns or his chain of restaurants. As soon as I start moving away, he shows this over-the-top annoyance—only because it's my decision, my doing. Not his. He does what he wants while I have to remain nearby where he can keep an eye on me and I can follow his demands.

It all started because of what I went through as a kid. After Linda and Meg saved me, I used to feel as if I was just drifting through life without actually being an active participant in it. I was too scared, too fragile and hopeless to keep going. Uri's strong will pulled me out of the drowning waters and took charge. He made me feel like I belonged—with him. I was grateful as I slowly found my way with him by my side. Developing passionate feelings toward him was something I'd never envisioned, but it was the most easily foreseen result.

After years of waiting in vain for him to see me as more, though, I finally found the strength to move on. I can't keep wishing for something that'll never happen. But it's impossible to move forward if he keeps pulling me back in.

"Uri, you need to let go. Please." *Let me go,* I almost beg him.

His jaw ticks, and for a moment, I almost convince myself it’s raw desire interlaced with undiluted fury filling his eyes.

Before taking me back inside the diner, he leans even closer. So close his face turns blurry and one of his dreads brushes my cheek. His intoxicating scent invades my lungs, his warm breath bathes my lips as he utters darkly, “Nobody will take you away from me. Not even yourself. Just accept it, Baby Blue.”

Sudden heat explodes inside my gut, rushing further down, even though his words have never sounded more ominous to me. Or maybe because of that.

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# two

URIEL

I toe the corpse with the tip of my leather boot as I wait for Rami to pick up my call.

“Bro, fuck, it’s too early to bother me again with your Sari obsession. Don’t you have even a smidge of common sense?”

“Common sense is the most uncommon thing ever,” I counter.

He lets out a low growl. “Uri, I’ve been looking for Phoenix all fucking night, don’t you—”

Hearing that fucking name makes bile rush up my throat. That fucker needs to die, after poisoning Meg and sending her into a coma. I don’t like feeling like I’m on the losing side, because I never lose…ever.

My eyes are caught by the dead body at my feet once again. I cut Rami’s morning-raspy blabbing off. “Got another little gift on my doorstep.”

I hear the rustling of sheets just before he says, “Are they alive and stabbed with an arrow this time as well?”

He’s referring to a few weeks ago when I found a tied-up and wounded donor near my front door.

“We are all corpses who haven’t yet begun to decay,” I taunt him.

“I’m too exhausted for this shit, Ariel!” I fucking hate that nickname, and he knows it.

“Unless he can grow his head back, he’s fucking dead,” I grumble. “No arrows in sight, but there’s a red stain on his shirt and two small tears in the fabric, heart level caused by a sharp point.” Probably an arrowhead.

“Headless?” I hear Hunter’s voice, my conversation with Rami must have woken his boyfriend up. “Is the head missing or just detached?”

I give another quick look around. “Missing. The gaping wound has no ragged edges; it looks clean and neat, well-executed by a sharp blade. The blood still fresh.” It turned the pure white snow crimson red and ruined—well and truly—the front wooden steps of my deck. I curl my lips. “This is becoming irksome.”

“Serena is checking the area now. No sign of him, but it has to be your fucking bio bro again. He’s the only one who can slip through Serena’s security alarm without any problem.”

If that’s the case, he’s like a wild cat leaving gifts on my front steps. The fresh blood means he couldn’t have gotten too far. How the fuck did he disappear so fast? The metal gates at the end of the long driveway are closed, the high electrical fence still working. So where did he come from? I need to do a perimeter assessment. If this was my biological brother again he must have found a way inside my lake house somehow.

The driveway is clear since I had someone plow it yesterday, and it didn’t snow during the night, so no footprints in sight.

“It was him,” Rami declares. “Sent you the video feed.”

I move the phone down and watch as a hooded man wearing a fucking white mask suddenly appears from the path around the back of my house, pushing a man—the soon to be corpse—with a machete, poking his back toward my front porch.. He makes the man turn around before abruptly cutting off his head, which flies over the porch rail as the body drops on the wooden steps.

He then looks straight at the camera. I can’t see his face, but I know he’s smiling behind that plain white mask. Why is he here, and why now?

“That’s rather bold and brutal,” I hear Hunter. “Are we sure it was your biological brother?”

Ty. That’s his birth name. But I have no ties left to my old life, not even my name—Meg changed it after she found me— and I don’t want any, so bio bro it is.

“Serena calculated his height, weight, and compared his gait with Uri’s… he’s definitely related to him.”

I knew it was him already. I just can’t explain how, but I do.

“Focus on the corpse and find the head while I’ll try to find out where the fuck he came from. I’ll send one of the bros your way to collect the corpse.”

I hum and end the call.

Dealing with these *gifts* gives life to a blazing fury inside my gut. It enrages me how easily my biological brother trespassed on my property once again, even more the thought that he’s always a few steps ahead of me.

I grit my teeth as I look down at the dead body again. There’s nothing to determine his identity. Average size, on the hairy side, covered in a fancy suit and a gray shirt, no shoes—his bare feet are covered with blood and dirt like he was forced to walk quite a while. All I can tell is that he’s male and headless. My bio bro couldn’t have killed him somewhere else and waited until he finished bleeding out before dumping him on my deck?

I don’t feel sufficiently caffeinated for this, but as I turn to go back inside the house, I see a tuft of blond hair peeking between the white lavender bushes at the edge of the porch.

“Got the head,” I mutter. It might be strange, but this isn’t the first time I’ve uttered those words. A smirk forms on my lips as I lean against the wooden rail and bend down until my fingers grab the damp locks. I pull the severed head up as I straighten and study its features. Definitely male, probably in his thirties—I shift the head closer—brown eyes, a crooked nose sporting some caked blood and a bruise on his cheek. I have no previous memory of his face.

A mystery to be solved. I'd enjoy this type of situation—since I like detective stories—if my bio bro wasn't involved. I don't like to be fucked with, and I've got the feeling that this is precisely what he's doing.

I take a picture and send it to Rami so he can search for the dead man's identity in one of his databases. I also forward it to Raph. If the corpse had any contact with our family, my brother will remember it, thanks to his eidetic memory.

I place the head near the body and then crouch down to pat his fancy suit and pants pockets, finding an opened soft pack of Marlboro, a magnetic Ritz hotel card, and an expensive wallet—there's a thousand dollars inside—all hundred-dollar bills—and a valet ticket. I look at the tips of some of the fingers on his left hand, they're yellow with nicotine. The pretentious diamond ring on his middle finger seems real, with the letters JP engraved on one side. I take a picture of it as well and send it to Rami. No ID or credit cards. They must have been removed for some reason.

Everything about this man screams wealth and tackiness—my usual type of target. I kill people who are above the law thanks to their status or riches. Not that I really care about what they have done or how they hid it. I am a sociopath—the proper diagnostic name is Antisocial Personality Disorder or ASPD. This disorder has quite a lot of negative stigmas around it. No conscience, no empathy, no regard for right and wrong, no remorse, a tendency to act impulsively and erratically. Smiling, smirking, or laughing out loud while witnessing another's pain. Not giving a flying fuck about anyone else—unless they screw with something of mine. Like my family.

My foster family. I became part of it after my foster mothers, Meg and Linda, saved me and the others from being tortured and experimented on when we were kids. I was five when I was taken from our shitty trailer park in the middle of the night to be the subject of an unauthorized government project. It allowed coldblooded scientists to experiment on me with the excuse of turning me into an emotionless assassin. Those motherfuckers didn't turn me into a sociopath, they actually chose me and the others for our psychopathic traits, which eventually disappeared in almost all the others—except me, Raph, and my bio bro—because they believed criminality and violent behavior were predispositions.

The unsanctioned project was eventually discovered and stopped, and any evidence of it buried under a pile of political bullshit while most of us—six subjects ended up with Meg and Linda, an eminent psychologist and the secret agent who'd busted us out.

The people involved in the project were eliminated, but the damage was done and those torturous years made us crave blood and death. Still, going on a killing spree while venting our anger was not *morally* correct or legal—blah, blah, blah. So, Meg taught us to direct that *darkness t*oward people who actually didn't deserve to breathe. We built a base for our bloody family business. It's there that we take the evil donors—*donors* because before they die they unwillingly donate their DNA and organs for research or to save others.

Edmund Burke said, "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." I do more than is expected of me, but I'm no good man and never fucking will be.

I sort of follow the "*an eye for an eye*" principle—the law of equal punishment. Even though is not really about the killing or the justice. It's all about causing pain and enjoying their screams, their suffering, witnessing all hope leaving their eyes while desperation and anguish replace it. I live for this shit. Torture is…a compulsive act for me—much like arson for Rague or being a psycho asshole horny for blood is for Raph.

A sadist sociopath is not rare, and I'm not talking about situational sadism. I don't gain pleasure or satisfaction out of hurting those who are *deserving*. I don't have any sense or desire for revenge, I don't actively seek it against those that have wronged others—that's nonsense. I merely derive pleasure from seeing and inflicting pain on others.

Pure and refined sadism. Ah, yes.

This part of my life is obviously all a secret. I don't want to be persecuted and end up inside a cage again. With my brothers, I've been carrying on the bloody family business for ten years now. It's like a perfectly working machine. Each of us has a particular, useful skill to contribute. We will never stop—for each of us his own reason. The world needs us just as much as I need to cause pain.

Nevertheless, when I leave the base—and I'm back out in the world—wearing a fake mask is necessary. I'm Uriel Mahoe, billionaire, business man, investor and owner of a chain of restaurants. It's not hard to conceal the real side of me; all of the smartest people in this world aren't so careless as to show others their true selves. With high-functioning sociopaths like me, it's all about appearances. I don't usually conform to norms unless I can take advantage of them. I'm extremely skilled at faking a range of different emotions—which is essential when reaching a certain status among Chicago's crème de la crème. Depending on the party and attendees, I can effortlessly manipulate every single one of them when invited to one of those lavish charity events. It's all a show, and I'm the main protagonist in the storyline—just how I fucking like it.

Even though there's an absence of certain emotions in my sociopathic brain, I can sometimes be happy…when others simply can't, because I don't have a conscience or feelings of remorse or guilt. The complete lack of these emotions can result in more happiness for me since I can't really imagine or feel the emotional worlds of other people. It's foreign to me.

I am capable of feeling euphoria, joy, and excitement, anger and sadness, but in a more blunted way than what is considered the norm—I can even cry on command. I can also form attachments to other individuals and, in general, enjoy being around other people, although that's kind of rare. Sometimes that makes me wish I could be free from mind-numbing social niceties—it can be grating since I'm completely detached from most people's source of happiness. All humanity could burn to ashes, and I wouldn't give a fuck.

There's only one person I'd run to save. My Baby Blue. I crave the hint of softness in his pale aquamarine eyes when I utter the nickname, the slight trembling of his lower lip. I like the thought of Sari all soft for me, too damn fucking much.

The first time I laid eyes on him was in a field of periwinkle flowers. They were surrounding him like an endless, silky blanket. He raised his gaze to mine—the same periwinkle shade reflected in his eyes—and the agonizing, profound desolation filling those pools bound him to me.

He actually became mine two years before that. During the first year of my imprisonment, I thought I was the only subject the scientists were experimenting on until one day I heard a cry. It was so soft and low I wasn't sure it was real. But the profound desperation, the hurt in those hushed sobs couldn't be a figment of my imagination.

I was only six, inside my cell in the secret facility where we were kept. I was huffing and growling with anger. Bloodthirst was running through my veins while I was shivering with cold, beaten up and aching like most nights, but that faint cry made me smile for the first time in a very long time. The quiet whimpering stopped when one of the assholes on staff had snarled, "Four, shut up!"

A slapping sound followed and then another sob before silence reigned again. Four had to be another subject like me. I was Seven. Was there a One? A Two? More? Was my brother one of them? At that time, I wasn't sure if they had taken him as well.

Subject Four sounded pathetic. Judging by their sobs, I didn't know how they endured and were still alive after all the torture they must have undergone. They sounded too defenseless, whimpering like a weak puppy —I liked the sound of that, though.

Over the following three years, I never heard them again. I reckoned they were dead. But I remembered Four and their murmured pain every single night. Those hushed cries became my companion in those long silent hours, my brief escape, my only pleasure. So when I saw that same level of despair in the skinny, battered kid surrounded by Baby Blue Eyes I'd known those sobs belonged to him. Four wasn't fucking dead. He'd survived, and it all became very simple to me. He was alive because he was mine.

I walked up to him and told him exactly that. He didn't react at all. But that was okay, I had all the time in the world to make him understand who he belongs to.

After all these years, he still smells like fucking apples and honey—that sweet scent is lodged in my brain. He let his hair grow, the thick mane cascades down his back when loose. He likes to braid all that dark silk.

Some spirited wisps always get loose to frame his delicate face, heart-shaped lips, and big, expressive eyes. His cheeks turn apple red so easily from embarrassment or nervousness.

At first I didn't care about the little changes he has undergone in the last months—caused principally by Lori—like using contact lenses, taking yoga classes, and wearing different clothes, still comfy, but higher quality, classy styles, and delicate tones. However, the way he's interacted with me has altered as well, pushing me away while not listening to me anymore. Then Meg got poisoned, and I discovered my bio bro is still alive. And I've been too busy looking for him since I learned of his reappearance, creating an even bigger distance between Sari and me.

Too much fucking space.

His newfound elegant appearance, his graceful moves, and tempting purity turn him into *sex on a stick,* as Michael called it. It fills me with the urge to devour him. I see him, and I burn. The harder I contain myself, the wilder my obsession with him grows. Fuck being foster brothers and fuck society's teachings of what's acceptable. I just can't fucking help it. I don't want to. I want him under me, submitting to me in the most carnal way possible. We aren't blood related, not brothers. We are connected in a way that exceeds family; it goes beyond fleeting emotions and useless feelings.

I don't know when it happened, but at some point I started wanting to turn his ordinary day-to-day, placid expression into a disheveled passionate one, filled with cries and sweat. And pain. Fuck yes! I want to fuck his hole loose and stir up his insides until I break him, until I make a mess of him.

But I fucking can't. Not if I want to see his eyes sparkle and crinkle, those little wrinkles forming at the corners when he smiles at me. I find respite from everything surrounding me only when he's with me. And I prefer to feel excruciating pain than not being around him at all.

I can't have him because I can't hurt him, no matter how much I want to. But he's still mine.

He makes a habit of dripping innocence and unspoiled naivety, that's why a number of bastards keep gravitating to him. But they don't know he was caught a long time ago by the worst of the worst. Me. All I can do is get rid

of all those fuckers, using any means necessary. From threatening texts, to finding them new job opportunities in different cities, to getting them charged for wrongdoing—with a hacker and a lawyer in the family, finding and using dirt on people is very easy. I'll go even further if I have to. Predators kill prey. It's natural, understandable, there's no need to justify it. And the world is a fun park full of oblivious prey. My hands never have enough blood on them, and I hate every motherfucker who takes Sari's attention away from me. I call it…serendipity.

I let the rope loosen around Sari's neck the last few months, just a little, enough to give him the illusion of being free to move away. When in reality, he's not, because I'm always there in the shadows pulling the strings. He does a job he enjoys while helping people—which satisfies him—and he has a family who cares for him. And me. This rebellious phase he's going through will end soon, but in the meantime, I need to change a few things.

First, this house needs to be secure, otherwise my plan for Sari won't work. Phoenix is close, and with them danger lurks around us. Sari is part of this family even though he doesn't enjoy the bloody side business like the rest of us do. I will keep him closer. I let him wander for far too long, and now a damn stalker is fucking with him. I'll end up killing them if they try to take him from me—not even my brothers or Linda will be able to stop me. Fuck that!

I look down at my phone when a gentle ring informs me of a notification. Rami created a monitoring program and uploaded it on my phone so that I can check on Sari's location. Through the tracker inside his neck and another inside his phone, Serena lets me know every time he moves. He just arrived at work. I tap on his red dot on the map and a live video from the CCTVs inside Bear-Stone Labs pops open on the screen. He's talking with Michael, getting ready for work; a sad song is playing in the background—he only listens to country music. He's smiling, braiding his long hair with deft, precise moves as Michael jabbers about something scientific.

He's so fucking delectable, and I'm starving.

I close the app and check my texts. Raph will be here in twenty minutes to help me with the body. There's also one from Rague letting me know he'll come tomorrow to work on the new rooms I'm building inside the house.

He owns a construction and demolition company; it was only logical to hire him for the job.

I leave the body behind and descend the last steps to walk around the house. My bio bro must have come from somewhere. He used one of the camera's blind spots to disappear, but maybe he left a trace. And if he did, I'll find it.

Two days later, I'm inside the base leaning against a glass wall. The knife I'm tossing flies up before I swiftly snatch it out of the air, repeating the action again and again. My eyes are firmly on the donor in front of me, passed out and tied to a metal chair; blood keeps dripping at his feet, creating a large crimson puddle. I'm giving my ears a well-deserved break from all the jackass's begging.

We are inside the FUNS room—the Fucked-Up Nasty Shitheads room. Here is where the torture and killing happen. Tools are hanging from the ceiling—axes, bats, a couple of clubs with spikes, nunchaku—that must be Lori's. More lie on the long table near me where I left Leslie, my Smith and Wesson 9mm gun. The grip is all bloody—I jabbed the donor in the head with it, repeatedly hence him being unconscious—I need to give it a thorough cleaning when I'm done.

I usually don't use firearms when I take care of a donor, but any kind of torture I deem fit is welcome. How to know what's the best one? I read their files first, keeping in mind what their preferences are. A doctor who harvests organs and sells them for money will be disemboweled without anesthesia; a serial rapist will be impaled on a cactus then castrated using a rusty saw, his dick flattened with a sledgehammer; a physically abusive motherfucker will get his hands chopped off and then forced to choke on his fingers one after the other. I'm not the Da Vinci of torture for nothing. Number one in our torture record book—doesn't matter that Raph yammers to the contrary.

After many years in the torture business, I've learned a few things—as I forced them out of these shitheads. For most evil scum, the killing per se isn't the source of pleasure. It's the feeling of pure dominance, the omnipotent ability to take a life, to produce a fear so great in their victims, it fills them with power and ecstasy.

Pain is not only physical. Mental torture can be equally excruciating—even worse for some people. So I usually start with the latter. Doubt. I look and wait for them to wake up all disoriented—after being kidnapped and drugged—restrained, tied naked to a chair in the FUNS room where the walls are covered in weird plastic sheets and torture tools are displayed all around. I check their reaction, and I play with them, ignoring their anxious questions, smirking or sighing, playing with my switchblade.

When *asked* the donors have described the unclear circumstances and scary environment as the cause of profound fear, and a sense of deep apprehension. Fucking A.

Then the part where I start working on their body comes. Everything becomes clear when I tell them they got caught. Watching the realization in their eyes is quite entertaining. The physical pain makes them plead their innocence, usually threats are made, often there're attempts at bribery—like this fucker here tonight. That's the boring part, like I would ever let them go. Preposterous.

This donor here is a particularly nasty fella. He lures people into his car—usually those living on the streets like homeless beggars, teens running from home, the mentally disabled—enticing them with the promise of money or a hot meal, of protection. He drugs them and then dumps them in the middle of a forest where he hunts them like animals. He uses different weapons, but always goes for the kill; the list of his victims is long. Don't know why he turned out this way. Don't care. I just want to make him suffer. The dirty police officer and the corrupt lawyer friend who in the past covered for him and accompanied him on the hunts are being picked up by Rague at the moment.

I take a long, deep breath. Blood and fear, that tangy new plastic smell from the flowery sheets covering the walls and floor—courtesy of Rami who

likes to give the place a hint of creepy cuteness—sweat and salty tears. It's refreshing.

One man's hell is another man's paradise. My paradise.

I look at him. I already chopped off each one of his fingers, carved the word PREY into his chest—which had been particularly satisfying—and stabbed him in the legs, arms, and shoulders. All things he did to his victims.

I could cut off every other appendage on his body until he turns into an unidentifiable lump of writhing meat. A little slice and dice is always enjoyable. Could use a rake to disfigure him, give him a Freddy Krueger mask. Skin him alive in front of a full-length mirror, starting from the ankles up to his neck.—a show is always entertaining. Fillet him from head to toe with no mercy. So many choices. We are all flesh and breath. So easy to break.

There's no time, no space when I'm torturing, only me and the screaming fuckers.

I feel particularly gruesome right now—more than usual. My thoughts move to my bio bro and the headless corpse he left at my lake house, Jasper Pendelton. It turns out he was one of the shitheads on my donor list, a pimp with a tendency to rape hotel maids and busboys—hence the Ritz key card I found in his suit—and then blackmail them to work for him and sell their bodies. He had some plastic surgery done, that's why I couldn't recognize him—a new name, a cover job while still doing the same shit.

I am extremely pissed at Rami for not realizing what was going on and for being incapable of stopping my bio bro from bypassing Serena at every turn. But I'm downright furious at my bio bro for stealing one of my fucking donors. Nobody takes from me and lives to see another day. If you cross me, I'm gonna enjoy your slow suffering before ending you. But… I'm also curious.

The few memories I have of my family aren't pleasant ones. My father was an abusive drunk truck driver, who killed my mother out of jealousy and ended up in jail. We were dropped at my uncle's, who took us on only to pocket the monthly childcare checks. He sold us to those scientists not long after to cover his debt with loan sharks.

When I turned eighteen, I wanted him to be my first kill, but both him and my father were dead already, and my bio bro was in the wind. I've been searching for him, though. I can't feel any kind of affection or longing, just as he can't toward me—being a psychopath. So why is my elusive bio bro leaving these corpses? What's his end game?

I'm still furious about him stealing my donor, and I want to repay him in kind…and stabs! I grab the knife's handle and swing it in the air, imagining that stupid white mask in front of me.

The donor suddenly jolts in his chair, his eyes are still closed. That's too bad since it's time to off him. My gaze falls on the bucket near the sink across the room, some cold water will definitely jazz him up. I move away from the glass wall but quickly change my mind as I toss the knife one last time in the air. When the wooden handle falls back in my palm, I tighten my hold around it and swing. The blade slices the donor's face, opening a long wound on his cheek.

"Ahhh!" he screams, his eyes frantically flickering around until they fix on my face. The pain filling them is rapturous. I need more.

"Please. Don't kill me," he gurgles. He's lost a lot of blood; his complexion is turning pale, and he's shivering like a baby deer.

After he murdered more than thirty people in cold blood, he's afraid to die. Go figure.

**"**Death is too easy, shithead. It's not about the destination, it's about the journey. Hurting you is what I'm here for. As simple as that."

"I am not who you think I am. You got the wrong…person." *Still going on with this crap?*

I use the tip of the blade to scoop up a drop of blood rolling down his cheek. He gasps into the silence.

"Are you saying I'm so stupid I got the wrong scumbag?"

He opens and closes his mouth, for lack of words, I presume. Moron.

“Human life equals shit to me just like it does to you. We can both kill with no problem. I don’t give a fuck who you are, just like you didn’t about your victims. The fact that you think you’re immune, it’s baffling.” I’ll never really understand people’s mindsets.

“Victims? I didn’t… Ahhhh!”

Another deep cut on the left cheek this time makes him cry out.

I know he’s lying. I would even if I hadn’t read his file. I’m a very good lie detector. Most people signal dishonesty with a twitch of their eye, gritted teeth, a balled-up fist, parted lips. He shows nothing because there’s no conflict inside him. Usually that’s the mark of what shrinks like to call a psychopath or a sociopath.

His eyes are closing once again, so I smack him with renewed force, leaving him grinding his teeth.

“How does it feel to be the victim? To simply have to take the pain?” I whisper darkly, while cleaning the blade with alcohol before pocketing it.

His chest heaves as he coughs up blood. It froths at the corners of his mouth with every breath. Then he smiles at me, gums painted bright red. The pretense is off finally. It took him a while—I check the time on my phone—one hour and seven minutes, hardly a record.

“What pain?” His laugh is interrupted by more coughing.

I quickly grab one of Gabe’s throwing knives from the table and pierce his neck on the right side. The squishy sound when it spears the skin gives me goose bumps.

“Don’t struggle,” I tell him as he finds the last of his fighting spirit while uselessly twisting on the chair. “Your trachea is severed; blood is filling your lungs. You’re drowning in it. Your brain is being deprived of oxygen and your nervous system’s quickly shutting down. Your sight has turned blurry, but you can still hear me.” I study him for a moment as he registers my words. “I’ll let you go with a pearl of wisdom. People don’t understand pain. They have no concept beyond their worst experience.” While I have been to hell and back. There’s no pain I cannot endure.

“I stubbed my toe the other day, does that count?” Raph’s idiotic statement reaches my ears through the intercom on the door. When I turn around, he’s standing behind the glass wall near his husband.

“Your donor is convulsing.”

“It happens when the show is over.” I remove the throwing knife from the donor’s neck, and after a couple of seconds, he stops moving.

“Did you use one of Gabe’s knives? He’s not going to like that,” Michael says.

I shrug, like I’m afraid of that fucker or his barking alter.

“I brought you a treat.” Michael has a plate and a container in each hand holding some kind of food that looks like inedible eggs and DOA pancakes. I look at Raph, but he’s staring at his phone. Michael is the worst cook in the universe, and my brother—one of the most gruesome killers in Chicago—can’t stop him from continuing to try.

“What’s that?” I point at the blob-looking thing inside the container.

“It’s bread made from scratch. I shaped it like a heart.” He’s smiling with excitement. *A shattered heart?*

“It’s green; is that mold?” I frown at it. “Is it a mangled iguana carcass? Or maybe something that once was food. I’m a restaurant owner; I can’t be in the same room with that thing.”

“Why do you all have to insult me like this while I pour all my love into baking?” He drops the plates on the floor, scattering pieces of…food and ceramic everywhere.

“Babe, c’mere.” Raph yanks him against his chest and then glares at me. I glare back. Fucking drama queens.

“I have a three-Michelin-star chef waiting to teach him how to cook, but he refused,” I remind him—actually the rest of the family begged me to do it.

“No, I didn’t. I told you I will if you have lunch with me once a week like we used to,” Michael replies with a glower. He’s asking me a favor in exchange for another favor?

When Raph got together with Michael, I went to see what all the fuss was about. I discovered we both like detective stories and food, so I started bringing him lunch during his work breaks. I did it mainly to fuck with Raph, but I kind of found him not so annoying after a while. But he started bringing those repellant dishes he cooked.. Plus, Raph doesn't leave him alone for long.

"I'm busy," I deadpan. "Tell me about that bird legend." Michael's knowledge of torture methods is quite ample.

"You mean the blood eagle?" He turns his head toward me, his cheek still on Raph's chest. "It comes from Nordic legends of Viking executions. The condemned's back was slashed to give access to the ribs, which were then broken and twisted upward to look like wings."

"Not bad," I comment, imagining doing it to my next donor. I'm going to need a sturdy table to lay the shithead down on and longer chains to restrain them.

"There's more, salt was poured into the wound. And as a final blow, the lungs were pulled out and draped over the rib-wings for effect. There's debate about whether or not this practice actually existed, or if it's just poppycock."

"Either way someone took the time to think this up." Raph smirks with wicked pleasure. I can clearly see what's going on in that lizard brain of his.

"By the way, the way you carve words into donors is subpar at best." Michael glances at the dead fucker behind me before sticking his tongue out at me.

I grit my teeth at his goading, then spin around and stab the throwing knife into the donor's lifeless eye. It twitches. Must be an involuntary muscle contraction. I sink the blade further inside the skull. Just to make sure he's fucking dead.

"Trying to steal the impaler nickname from me?" Raph keeps annoying me.

"Hearing your voice is like dragging my balls across shattered glass," I mutter.

“That’s an idea. Should take it for a spin in the FUNS room,” Michael states.

“Done that.” Raph kisses his husband’s head.

“Why the fuck are you here? You’re disturbing me,” I bark.

Raph looks to my left at a chair where a piece of paper lies. I must have been so taken by the torture, I didn’t hear him come inside the room. I clean the blood off my hands as best as I can using a wet cloth and then grab the folded paper.

It looks like a threatening note…a ridiculous one.

ONE WEEK LEFT.
OWNERSHIP OF YOUR MOCCASINS WILL PASS ON TO ME.
BE SOLD ON ETSY FOR FIVE CENTS.

There’s a little doodle of a middle finger at the end.

Those are my genuine Italian ostrich leather moccasins, which he stole from me. It’s a battle that has been going on since we were kids. We take something from one another and hide it, calling each other names while we go crazy looking for it. The truth is, it keeps our relentless personalities busy so we don’t fall into darker patterns. Lately though, I’ve been too taken by all the rest to play the game.

“There’s no time limit, you fucker. And why use cut-out letters if there’s nothing anonymous about it?” I deadpan, sending a *you moron* look at Raph as I turn the note to show it to him. “You brought it to me.”

Michael gasps. “Oh my God. You mauled my Scientific American for that? How dare you, you-you psycho!”

“Piglet, I was bored. You’re working all the time.”

And here is the restless side I was talking about before. *I get bored too, but a threatening note? Really?*

“Like you don’t. Use your own damn magazines!” Michael punches his husband’s chest too weakly for my liking.

“I don’t read paperbacks.” Raph sounds unbothered by it all, but his arms tighten around Michael.

“I’m going to kill you!” Michael growls like an annoyed little kitty.

“How are you going to do it?” I’m the one goading this time.

“Not sure.” He huffs flailing his arms.

“He’ll suffocate me…with kisses. He loves me to death,” Raph states with a smirk.

Michael sniffs at him. “You can’t use the love card every time you drive me mad!”

“I’ll do it then.” I grab Leslie, my gun, from the table and release the safety. Am I teasing? I’m not sure. I’ve thought about ending him many times, in multiple different ways. It’s kind of a hobby.

Michael turns to me. “Can’t you see that he did this for you, Uri?”

“No, I didn’t!” Raph frowns at him.

“He even used a lame TV drama stunt to draw you away from your messy thoughts.”

“No, he didn’t!” I look at Raph’s unfazed expression, empty eyes, and mouth in a straight line.

“*Moccasins bye bye*,” he mouths with a wave of his hand. Motherfucker! I point Leslie’s muzzle at his face through the glass wall. He smirks smugly. A round between his eyes will erase that stupid expression off his mug.

“The code, Uri,” Michael exclaims.

Fuuuck! How can Raph be with such a goodie-two-shoes? Yes, we follow the code Linda put down for us, to remind us where the morally gray line

we shouldn’t step over, stands. Which means I can’t kill Raph only because he’s a shithead. He needs to turn into an evil shithead for me to do so.

“You’ve become so tedious, professor,” I taunt Michael with a tsk as I lower my gun.

Raph flips me off, and I’m about to repay him in kind when Lori appears, followed by Gabe and Rague, who has a donor hanging from his massive shoulder.

“You know what’s really tedious?” Lori asks; he must have eavesdropped on our conversation. “Your controlling attitude toward Sari. Make up your mind, you stuck-up socio!”

“Go back to hell, Satan’s pet!” I rub a hand over my tired eyes.

“Why would I do that when I can fuck with you lot?” Lori intones in a snarky voice.

Rague enters the FUNS room and lets the donor fall unceremoniously on the floor. It’s the dirty cop who helped cover up my donor’s hunting hobby. “Is he dead?”

Rague replies by pushing his shoe into the donor’s face until I hear a crack.

I set Leslie on the table again and crouch down to check the corpse. It’s still warm, but his chest is curved inward, the black fabric on the torso wet with blood.

“The lawyer? Dead too?”

“Yes,” Lori replies for him, since all Rague is doing is growling and glaring. “What’s left of him is in the kidnapping van.”

Fucking hell.

Another growl. Rague’s face is flushed, veins almost popping on his forehead and arms. He keeps gritting his teeth, his body trembling with uncontrollable anger. Is he having a *light* red haze episode? It’s happened in the past when he lost his marbles and destroyed everything in his path. Almost killed Rami one time, tried with me as well. Those scientists

experimented on his brain when he was imprisoned, fucking him up. These days he can control it…mostly. Better if his husband is near him.

“Where’s Ollie?” I ask, turning toward the glass wall. If he isn’t coming, maybe I can have some more fun.

“Coming,” Michael replies.

Shots suddenly resound inside the room as Rague sinks four bullets inside my donor’s torso. Then he yanks the throwing knife out of the fucker’s eye and starts stabbing the top of his head, creating an even bigger mess. The sound is gag inducing, but I’m blasé about the highest level of gruesome.

“It’s like he’s trying to make a jack-o’-lantern following a Michael Myers tutorial,” I hear Lori whisper.

Nobody says anything else until Rague is done. He needs to vent his inner monster’s fury and although the thought of poking at it comes back, I decide against it. I have stuff to do.

“I think he’s eternally-returned-to-dust dead, amen and all that holy stuff, KKJ,” Lori hazards. I guess Super Model is a better nickname than King Kong Junior.

But fuck, I just came here to have some alone time with my donor. To clear my head and have some fun, not attend one of my family’s annoying shows.

“Is that my throwing knife?” I hear Gabe asking stiffly, his expression flat and blank as he taps away on his phone.

“Fuck off, Gabriz!” Rague finally speaks, addressing Gabe, Bez, and Lori.

“Another ship name?” Michael groans.

“Fine!” Lori grabs Gabe’s forearm. “Gabriz is leaving the third circle of hell, the one for crazy psychos!”

“I’m a sociopath!” Fucking loathe when they lump me together with psychos.

“Whatever. Like there’s a difference at the moment,” Bez taunts me. I hear a small laugh, and it’s like a switch turning on inside my head. I grab

Rague’s bloody hand still wrapped around Leslie and spin us toward the glass wall, lifting the gun and pulling the trigger five times, muzzle pointed right at Bez.

Lori screams, while Raph grabs Michael and moves his body behind him. Bez/Gabe remains still, cool as a cucumber. Not a twitch. They know the glass is bullet proof; they were here when Rague changed it two months ago —Raph as well, don’t know why he’s shielding his husband.

“You bloody, shitty arsehole!” Lori yells at me, his watery eyes fixed on the bullets stuck in the glass. He then frantically pats Gabe’s body before climbing him like a tree and wrapping himself around him.

He should know by now about my spontaneous outbursts. I do dream of hurting every single one of my bros, but I’ve never actually done it.

“I’m. A fucking. Sociopath,” I snap as I lower the gun and glare at all of them.

Then I move toward the door that leads to the bathroom. Need a fucking shower. Rague can dispose of the bodies since he enjoys acid’s effectiveness so fucking much.

My Hummer is gliding smoothly through the snowy streets of Chicago, a marvel of design and engineering. Warm air blows out of the vents drying the damp ends of my dreads. My black duster coat is lying on the leather passenger seat, hiding Leslie underneath. I had to change my dirty clothes, and now I’m wearing kickass ankle boots, black jeans, and a burgundy cable knit—blood is less visible on dark colors. And with Sari’s stalker lurking around, I never know when I’ll need to shed some.

Five more minutes and I’ll be at my lake house in Winnetka, a suburban area of Chicago. I have just enough time.

“Serena, show me Sari’s position.”

“Sure thing, Uri,” she replies straight away.

A map with a red dot appears on the dash screen. Sari is having a top-rated gastronomic experience with Michael, Raph, and Sandy—their PA—in my upscale bistro downtown. I usually go along for their monthly office dinner, but I need to check on the work Rague’s men did at the house. It needs to be ready by tomorrow night.

“Serena, access the cameras in the bistro,” I order.

I’m the owner, no need for Serena to hack into them. She finds their table straight away—the best in the place.

“Zoom on Sari.”

And there he is. His new red-rimmed glasses should make him look like a nerd, but instead turn him into a tsunami of innocence and dirty thoughts. His long, elegant fingers with neatly filed, milky-white nails wrap gracefully around the glass stem. His relaxed smile gleams under the restaurant fluorescent lights.

After a moment, he leaves the table, moving toward the toilets. He’s wearing a pair of soft-looking velvet pants that envelop his legs like a second skin. Those plump cheeks are begging for my hands’ attention with each step he takes. The thought of them jiggling under my eyes with every hard, punishing thrust of my hips as I ruin his hole makes me want to turn my fucking car around and go to him.

“Fuck!” I rub my hand over my mouth, not sure what to do with myself. One long look at him, and I’m on fire. I start biting the barbell in my tongue impatiently. I’m hotly aware of the way my sweater rubs against my nipples, the pinch of the metal hoop in my eyebrow, the sweat covering the ink along my chest, and the urge to pull Sari onto my lap to punish him for displaying his uncontainable beauty for other men’s leery looks.

*I need to move up my plan.* That reminds me. “Call Clover.”

“Did you do it?” I ask as soon as he picks up.

“Learn proper etiquette before calling someone on the phone.” *Why is he whispering?*

I wouldn’t have given him the job, but Clover is the only one who could get inside Sari’s building without detection. He’s a thief we use when we need some extra help with the donors. We pay him abundantly for his facilitation. But, as the rest of humanity, he is annoying as fuck.

“Just answer the fucking question!”

“I didn’t want to let them go. They were so cute!”

Really? Maybe I should have turned to the triplets; they seem to like animals as well as unleashing chaos.

“Clover.”

“Wait a second. I’m upside down and sweating like a horse here,” he pants.

“Like a pig, sweating like a pig.”

“It makes no sense. Pigs don’t sweat. Horse on the other hand,” he whisper-yells. Then I hear a thud, a curse, and the abrupt beeping sound of an alarm going off.

“You’re on a job,” I state, unimpressed as I halt the Hummer in front of my house gates.

“No, I’m just…passing time between jobs,” he replies, out of breath.

I type in the security code. “What are you stealing?” I ask, as I go through the retinal scanner before the gates open. This conversation is also me passing time.

“I didn’t steal anything. I just studied…closely a couple of paintings and a few sculptures.”

“Where?” I wait for the garage door to open, staring out over the magnolia trees, the path beyond, and the lake past that.

“The Art Institute. Those Water Lilies… Didn’t know paint strokes could feel so rough under the fingertips.”

I’m not surprised he could enter and walk around a place in Chicago with the most advanced security system in the world. Rami *bumped* into Clover when working on a case, they were both somewhere they shouldn’t have

been, so they mutually decided to ignore each other. Rami was impressed by Clover's Lupin the III thieving skills, so he decided to hire him for the next case. Five years have passed since then.

"Anyway the job is done," he lets me know. I keep hearing clanking noises through the line. What the fuck is he doing? "I don't question my clients when given a job…"

I could be charming, smooth-talking, and likable with disingenuous intentions. Sociopathic individuals are better at influencing others, at manipulating them. We probably invented it. Nevertheless, today has been a fucking long day, and it's not over yet.

"So don't," I forcibly state, grabbing the phone from the dash.

He huffs, but doesn't say more about it. "I kept one of the rodents."

"Why?" I exit my car and stop near it, while opening the bank app on my phone.

"As a pet," he replies.

I've never understood the need to own a pet. I see it more as a burden than a companion. The need to feed it, clean up after it, even cuddle it. Sari got one last month. Dare, one of the triplets, took him to their pet shelter, and when he came back, he had adopted a hairless guinea pig. The animal is all pink with a large black spot on his tailless butt and white, frizzy hair only on its muzzle, feet, and legs. He named him Albert E., since he thinks there's a resemblance with the German theoretical physicist. I only see a squishy, ugly, biting thing, who's screaming to be squeezed to death—like a stress ball.

"Need to give him a name, any suggestions?"

"No. I transferred the money with a little extra. Not a word to Rami."

"Why not? Oh crap, gotta go!" He ends the call, and I pocket my phone and walk out of the garage and into the house. The front wall is all made of glass to enjoy the quiet courtyard. A wooden bench, a small table, and the old pomegranate tree standing in the middle, with its twisted bark and long branches covered in snow.

I have a penthouse in a newly constructed high-rise, and a condo in downtown Chicago, but that tree is one of the main reasons I decided to buy this lake house last year.

I turn left and stride down the corridor, passing the living room and the kitchen to stop at the lab's threshold. It smells like fresh paint and chemicals. Tomorrow morning, all the equipment and tools I ordered will arrive. I move next door. The soundproofing in the room is almost done, by tomorrow afternoon everything will be ready.

In the meantime, I need to fucking find my moccasins before Raph forces me to kill him. What should I take from him next? One of the blood paintings inside his penthouse? His Ducati? His teeth?

I climb the stairs to the second floor and go check the walk-in-closet they finished today. A soft, red carpet covers the floor, and cabinets and shelves fill the walls. The blue flowers painted along the door panels look as good as the painter showed me on his portfolio. I look at the delicate design, lost in old memories for a moment. The settee in the corner, still wrapped in plastic, needs to be set in front of the shoe shelves, the cream chaise lounge moved near the chest of drawers, all the clothes hung and the accessories placed inside the drawers. I didn't know renovating a house could be this time-consuming.

The thought of going to Madame Claudette's crosses my mind for a moment, but I'm not that pent up. Not yet.

I descend the stairs and tread down the hallway which leads back to the garage and the gun room next to it. I let the facial recognition do its job as I stand still. The door opens with a click, and I let it close behind me.

This is the only room in the house that deserves my time. The acrid, smoky scent of the propellants and burned metal hits me first, the scent of the paper targets slowly gets into the mix with the wooden one from the floor.

I slide Leslie out the back of my pants and place it on the long counter in front of the target lines— there are three firing lines, one for each target. I push a button and a large section on the wall flips putting on display a number of heavy firearms: a Swedish K, RPGs, MP5Ks, SIGs—which I love because they don't have external safety—some hunting rifles, and my

Old Betsy, a Browning X Bolt. It helped me hunt and engage *targets* with precise accuracy at extended ranges on many occasions. I usually keep it in the trunk of my car, but it needs some cleaning.

I ponder for a moment if I should unload one of the rifles before moving toward the multiple drawers filling the other side of the wall. They contain smaller guns—a 45, a HK VP9, and a FN 509 Compact. I let my eyes slide over the six calibers, they don't have much power, but will do the job. Then the revolvers and the semi-autos, like the CZ75B.

My guns are an extension of myself, like an arm or a leg. They follow my lead wherever I take them. They are also receptacles of memories. I give each a name after it fulfills its purpose. And my new customized Staccato 9mm is waiting for one, whether it is Phoenix or the stalker or my biological brother.

The image of ending Phoenix once and for all with a bullet between their eyes turns my dick stiff. Maybe I do need to go to Madame Claudette's and release some of this restless energy. But the only ass I want to turn apple red and pound over and over is Sari's sweet, virgin one.

I grit my teeth against the wild desire, needing something else to focus on, something familiar that doesn't incite my impulsive nature or my tendency to tear everything apart. I reach into the drawer; my fingers wrap around the cool metal of the Staccato. I eject the clip, check it, and pop it back in smoothly.

I take the safety off and point the gun at the silhouette target on the opposite side of the wall. The moonlight glints from the skylights off the top of it as I pull the trigger once, twice, five times—the bullets embed into the beams behind with a thud. The booming sound echoes in my ears even after I'm done. I take in measured breaths, my fingers twitch along the gun. I feel more in control by the second, until a warning shiver rushes down my spine. I spin around and point the muzzle at the figure leaning against the wall in a relaxed position.

His eyes—the exact shape and shade as mine—are looking back at me, studying, scrutinizing. Same plump lips, caramel skin, wide nose, and arched eyebrows. Same face.

I find it fucking annoying to have an identical twin. It means there's someone with my face out there in the world, doing shit. Even Serena can't distinguish between us, letting him stroll around everywhere he fucking pleases—unless he decides to wear that damn mask.

He's observing me the same intense way I'm regarding him. It's uncanny how alike we look.

We must have unique features, though, we aren't clones. For starters, he has no piercings on his face. And when he pushes down the hood of his sweater, a green bandana is wrapped around his forehead and a thick lock of hair falls on top of it. Light brown strands like mine, but wavy and short. He has a mole on his neck and no taste in clothes whatsoever—unless trashy style is in vogue.

I keep my expression blank while a sense of irritation starts burning inside of me.

How the fuck didn't I notice him getting in? Was he already inside the house when I arrived? He's holding Annie, my Glock 40, as he pushes against the wall and takes a couple of steps toward me, gun down by his side. Same height, but he seems brawnier than me, can't tell with all those layers of cheap clothes on him.

I need to tell Rami about these differences, so that Serena can tell us apart next time and stop my bio bro from breaking and entering into my house. I should call him right now, but that's exactly what he wants me to do. He let me see his face on purpose. It's a way to show me his *good faith*. Or maybe a trick to gain my trust before pouncing.

Mm. My interest is piqued. I want to see where this is going.

"What makes you think you can just invade my space?"

"Isn't that what family members do, Uriel?" His voice is gruff and deep, with a little rasp to it.

"Are we family? A psychopath and a sociopath, father would be so proud," I state sarcastically.

“Ha. He didn’t even recognize me when I slit his throat,” he confesses to the killing nonchalantly. I was told father was killed in prison by another inmate. Did he sneak inside just to murder him? Or end up inside on purpose? I had my own plan for how to end father’s miserable life; he beat me to it.

I lower my gun, still remaining alert. “Uncle, was his death an accident?” A car accident four months before father. I never thought about the possibility of my biological brother being the perpetuator.

He takes his time to answer, looking around. “I ran him over with a truck. Held him under the heavy tires for a few extra seconds as his bones cracked. Old sins have long shadows, you know?”

“Do you expect a thank you? You took my revenge away from me,” I hiss, remembering how unsatisfied and enraged I felt when I’d discovered both men were dead.

“You started killing late…at eighteen.” He makes a taunting whistling sound. “I started way younger. Was mostly forced to do it, but I enjoyed it. I don’t prolong their end, though…unlike you.”

“You did some deep research.” I sniff. “Do you also happen to know the color of my damn underwear?”

He smirks, starting to walk around the room, glancing around. “No, because you don’t wear any.”

*Deep research it is.*

“We both didn’t when we were kids; hated it,” he adds. I don’t remember not wearing it when I was a kid. I don’t now because it makes me feel itchy and restrained.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. I’m not expecting a direct reply from a psychopath, but I can discern a few things from the way he avoids questions.

“Azrael. My name is Azrael.”

Azrael. “The Angel of Death.” Meg was always interested in religious narratives, that’s why she gave us, her foster kids, the seven names of the angels of wrath.

He nods. “Ezra, if you prefer. You all got angel names, I thought I should get one as well.”

“Why?” His candidness, the willingness to answer my questions must be part of a conniving plan. He can easily manipulate the conversation and seems to have a grandiose sense of self-worth. He’s also giving me his back while studying the room, as if he’s not afraid of me.

“I was experimented on as well. Longer than you guys. Don’t I deserve an angel name, too?”

A week before Linda and Meg came to rescue us, he was moved to another facility. They only discovered about…Ezra’s existence six months after I was released, when one of the men responsible for the experiment confessed it. But by the time Linda got there, they had already left once again with Ezra.

“I have a feeling you are not here to be part of the family.”

In his gaze, I can see the same deviousness that I find in my eyes every time I look in the mirror. “So that’s what you call it? Family.” He seems to ponder on the word for a moment. “I’m here mainly because we have an enemy in common.”

“Phoenix.”

“Father shot our mother dead; is that why you like guns?” he changes subject.

“No. Why do you like arrows? Do you have Robin Hood syndrome or something?”

“I see,” he mutters cryptically.

“You took a nice piece. It shoots underwater,” I remind him he’s still gripping Annie.

He looks down at the firearm in his hand before turning a wicked look my way. “A pity the lake is cold as shit, then.”

Would he have used me as a target? “Why the dead body on my front step?”

I see a hint of excitement in his eyes. “That was a happy coincidence. I was working.”

Rami found out Ezra is an assassin for hire on the dark web. “White Death. Did you choose that handler name because of your mask or vice versa?”

“I wasn’t the only one researching deeply.” A small smirk appears on his lips.

“After you dumped the first body, I felt compelled to do so,” I counter.

His open smile reminds me of a coldblooded reptile. He knows I’m lying, since I’ve been looking for him for years. The only information I have, though, is the journal the scientist kept while *training* him, which Linda found in the facility where he was held, and some scattered facts Rami was able to discover. Very little compared to what he seems to know about me. Not that I care about his life, but the fact that he knows more puts me at a disadvantage. And that, I don’t fucking like.

“The first body was a gift to show you I’m open to sharing information on Phoenix. The second and most recent one was, as I said, a coincidence. He saw my face while I was taking care of a client, and he called me by your name. I found out he was one of your…what do you call them? Donors. That AI, Serena, is a great time saver.”

When Raph saw the headless guy’s picture, he told me we’d met him at a gala six months ago. He remembered me talking to him. I have a vague memory of an obnoxious fucker hitting on everything that moved that night, even me. I told Rami to check him out that night, and I found out that Jasper Pendelton was an eligible donor. My list is long, though, and there are last-minute additions as well, that’s why his execution kept getting postponed.

Ezra points Annie toward the wall with the targets. His stance is steady and balanced; he must have experience with guns, not only arrows and beheading people.

“So why did you cut his head off?”

“I wanted to try my new machete.” He shrugs, then shakes Annie in the air. “Where do you keep the ammo for this?”

I stare at him while I lift my gun toward the targets. I fire two shots without taking my eyes off him. I don’t need to look, because I know those bullets hit right between the silhouette’s eyes. “Third drawer on the left,” I tell him, confident he got the message. This is my reign. If he tries something, I’ll end him. No hesitation.

He moves to the line of drawers, and after finding the right one, he starts loading the gun.

“I know you have questions. I’ll answer three.”

It seems like a let’s-cut-the-bullshit act, but it feels more like a calculated step. He didn’t have Meg and Linda growing up. He’s probably not a high-functioning psychopath like Raph, who possesses core psychopathic characteristics and leverages them for success in specific contexts, while following—more or less—societal norms.

Apathetic, narcissistic, charming, secretive, sexually deviant—all terms that describe me perfectly, but I, too, am a *good* sociopath. I wear my *mask of sanity*, presenting a facade of normalcy, making it hard for others to identify my true nature. We have the ability to control and apply our psychopathic/sociopathic traits. But Ezra is a dangerous enigma. One that we will probably need to eliminate. I don’t have any problem with that. I didn’t search for him out of brotherly concern—I don’t understand the purpose of that emotion—I did it out of arrogance. I was sure I’d be able to find him easily; he is my twin brother. And when that didn’t happen, it was my frustration and stubbornness that kept me going. Maybe that’s why I like detective stories so much, the thrill of the chase, the obscurity and ambiguity. But like my revenge, Ezra took that from me when he appeared out of the blue. He didn’t come to me, though. He went to see Linda first—three times—who didn’t share the fact until recently.

“Why are you here in my house? And don’t give me the *same enemy* crap, you’ve been stalking me and my brothers.” Wearing that stupid white mask like a sicko serial killer.

I hear the soft click of the closing drawer, then Ezra turns around, gun aimed at me, eyes void of any emotion. He shoots. The bullet flies, cutting the air near my ear before piercing the target behind me.

I don't move. My heart keeps beating at its usual rhythm as I give him a hard stare. I'm not afraid of dying. Death isn't the worst phenomenon; it's just the final act of life. I've been shot at more times than I can count, and I have quite a few scars to prove it—a repercussion of the bloody business I'm part of. I accepted it, and I'm used to it.

"I'm on vacation," he then says. *A very long vacation.* He's been lurking around for three months.

"You said you were working when you met headless guy," I growl, sick of this half malarkey. I'm still looking down Annie's barrel, and I feel an overwhelming urge to reciprocate.

"That was just a little extra on the side. I got slightly bored…*stalking* you. Your double life is not as enjoyable to observe as I thought."

Fucker! "My family would enjoy observing you, though. You don't mind if I invite them here, right?" I grab my phone from my pants pocket. It's time to contact Rami.

He tilts his head to the side, giving me another empty stare. "I'm afraid I can't tonight. Two questions left."

"You didn't answer my first yet." He's a crafty asshole, but growing up with Raph I learned how to recognize all the half-truths hidden among the horseshit.

"I was doing a recon to see what you were all up to. Don't you do the same with your donors?"

"To kidnap and kill them without repercussions," I clip.

"It's too early to tell what will happen." His retort reflects my thoughts exactly.

"How did you get inside my house?"

“You should have asked me how I move undetected around Chicago city. Because getting inside this lake house was child’s play. I think I overestimated you.” I growl in reply to his insult. He smiles. “You’re still irascible, so easy to fuck with.”

“And you’re still an asshole.”

He finally lowers the pistol, sniffing at my words. “That’s a word I hear often.”

*From whom?* Rami didn’t find any trace of a family or a partner. Does he attend an assassin annual reunion? Even if there were one, he wouldn’t go. No, Ezra gives out crazy loner vibes, but again, we didn’t find much about his life. We don’t even know how he escaped from the facility. Unless…he didn’t. He is an assassin, which was the goal of the experiment—to turn us into emotionless, killer puppets. But Ezra doesn’t work for the government. He’s…self-employed.

“It’s more fun to find that answer by yourself, isn’t it?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Why is Phoenix targeting you as well?”

He hums. “We share a past.”

Finally we are getting somewhere. “What past, Ezra?” Did he work for him? With him? Was Phoenix a client?

“Unfortunately time’s up.”

“No, it isn’t.” I lift my semi-auto at him.

“If you wanted to kill me, you’d have done it by now,” he states without showing a smidge of fear.

“I can still shoot you in both legs and prevent you from leaving.”

He hums again. I’m starting to hate that fucking noncommittal sound.

“You could, but that wouldn’t be wise. Phoenix is getting closer, and you need all help you can get.”

“What I need is answers,” I snarl.

“And I’ll give them to you in time.”

“Time,” I echo, putting my gun down, still keeping the safety off.

He’s studying my face again with acute concentration. “We are inextricably linked, Uriel,” he finally utters in a stern tone. “Our faces. Our lives. Maybe even our deaths.”

“Funny, since you’re the one who stayed away all this time,” I retort.

His eyes darken just a split second before he shifts to the left, making me move to the right, my gun pointing at his knee. He unloads Annie…at the silhouette target with his eyes on me—mimicking my intimidation act from earlier. In the corner of my eye, I see the holes he left on the face of the target forming a downcast mouth. I’m not that impressed. Good aim must simply be in our genes.

“Don’t you have any questions for me?” I ask him, as he leaves the gun on the counter and turns toward the door.

He stops for a moment. “That’s for next time.” When he passes the threshold, he adds, “Don’t follow me.” And disappears.

*Nobody tells me what to do.* I lift my phone. “Serena, show me the man who’s exiting my house.”

“Here is the live video, Uri,” she promptly answers.

Ezra appears on my phone screen. He’s walking purposefully to the back door, through the garage. When he’s out, he follows the path to the lake. I have fewer cameras out there, but I added motion sensors. I need to see how he gets in and out so quickly to disappear completely. He shifts behind a tall bush; there’s no CCTV there. The motion sensors still catch his movements as he keeps advancing until he reaches the lake and vanishes.

I quickly find my way out of the house after I grab a flashlight, retracing his steps. It’s damn cold. As I’m making my way to the lake I see it. A jet boat cutting through the water. Fuck! Ezra is at the wheel, I could chase him with the cruiser tied on the deck, but it would take to much time to prep it.

I let out a loud growl, when the light coming from the flashlight shows the utility hole half covered by snow. My mind goes back to Ezra's previous words. Damn it!

"Serena, call Rami."

"Yes, Uri."

I turn around, heading back to the house, phone near my ear. I feel both irritated at myself and excited by the new discovery. When my bro picks up, I don't give him time to talk. "He was here."

"Who?" Rami asks, sounding alert.

"Ezra. My bio bro. I know how he appears out of thin air to disappear just as fast in the city."

"Ezra? Okay, you need to tell me everything."

I don't know everything…yet. Next time, though, he will tell me his true intentions through his own volition or my gun's. Either way, he'll talk.

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# *three*

SARIEL

I stop as a long breath leaves my lungs. It’s always cluttered in my place, no matter how often I seem to organize things. Books dominate almost every surface, chairs, the sofa, the table, and kitchen counters. Partially used notebooks are scattered around as well, along with files and pencils because I prefer paper to technology—a horror show for Rami. I’ve never cared much about this apartment; I spend almost all my time in the labs or at the base. I acquired it years back because the building is close to work and in a safe area. I heard Uri saying it is good to invest our money, so I did—he wasn’t very pleased about my *impulsive purchase*, though. I’ve made a few decisions in my life by myself, always asking for advice first, but I didn’t want to give this up. That was the first time I stood up to him. He sulked for a month, but still came and fell asleep on the sofa in my lab whenever I pulled an all-nighter.

I look around the scarcely furnished living room. The reason why this luxurious apartment never felt like mine is because I never made it mine. Still, being forced to move out leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I run my hand along the small set of lopsided shelves I hung up after buying the place. There’s two framed pictures. One of the whole family around the dinner table—Ollie, Sully, Lori, Hunter, and the triplets included. And one of me and Uri as kids; my eyes fixed on his serious face. I’m beaming at him, while he’s looking straight into the camera, a glare in his gaze.

The thought of being his brother never sat well with me since I was a kid. Growing up, it often gave me a lancing pain somewhere below my sternum. How could he be, when I wanted to kiss the hell out of him?

My phone starts vibrating. Texts are popping in the Bloody Bunch group chat—Rami continues renaming our family chat every few months.

LORI
Rats? In your luxurious apartment?

News travels fast among my brothers. There's a rat infestation in my building, which is more than odd since this is a high-end apartment building, located in River North, one of the most expensive neighborhoods of Chicago.

ME
It appears so

SULLY
Are we talking real rats?

MICHAEL
What other kind are there?

OLLIE
Five-foot-nine assholes

RAMI
That was oddly precise

LORI
Do they have thick, long, hard tails as well?

RAMI
Oh yeah, do they? *fire emoji* *eggplant emoji* *wink face emoji*

OLLIE
You're a ginormous perv

RAMI
Me or Lori?

SULLY
Both

LORI

Sully-doo, you lovely little shit! I didn't add you to the chat to be a self-righteous ass

SULLY

Love you, too

I'm glad to see Sully's sassy responses. He looks like he's getting better these days.

GABE

Sari, I have your case against the building maintenance ready

URI

Good. Proceed. This is unacceptable

Uri wants me to sell the place and sue the company who takes care of the building. But I don't want to start a legal war without knowing all the facts. Also I don't have time to look for another place to live right now.

ME

Thanks, Gabe, but I'm not sure I want to pursue legal action

RAGUE

I can use physical action

OLLIE

That body of yours is mine for the next twelve hours. I'm ten minutes from home

RAMI

No couple messages in the Bloody Bunch group chat!

LORI

Gabe is just looking out for you, Angel

He's a fantastic lawyer, meticulous and ruthless, and since Lori went to work for him, he became even more renowned. I just need some time to think.

ME

I know. I'm grateful. But, please, let's just wait for now

RAPH

When are you moving to Uri's?

Raph seems cold and distant, but he always has my back.

URI

Today

He’s here with me now. I hear him moving inside my bathroom, packing the essentials. I’ll be staying with him until this rat infestation problem is resolved.

RAPH

Moving fast

MICHAEL

Pity. We prepared a room for you

SULLY

You can share mine if you like

HUNTER

Ash’s room is available since he moved out

URI

Sari is coming with me

LORI

Yes, sir! Did you off all the rats with bazooka Jane?

HUNTER

Bazooka Jane?

LORI

Super Model’s huge dick of a rifle. How can you not get it?

URI

That’s Old Betsy

LORI

If you have to name your weapons, give them imposing names like Ginevra or Victoria.

OLLIE

Like Poppy?

RAMI

How about Bang-Bang?

MICHAEL

Buffy!

LORI

I can’t with you lot. I’m off to class

RAPH

So touchy

SULLY

Is Albert E. okay?

RAGUE

Who’s Albert?

MICHAEL

Sari’s hairless rabbit

RAMI

I don’t like rabbits, they are secretive fluffy fuckers. Always looking like they are about to spill the beans…but they never do

RAPH

Hunter, get your boyfriend’s brain checked

HUNTER

It’s too late to have him tested

ME

A rabbit’s scrotum is in front of its penis

GABE

What the actual fuck

That must be Bez, the answer sounds too emotional to be Gabe.

LORI

So they rub their ass while doing the dirty. Double pleasure. Trojan the rabbit is d-i-r-t-y

GABE

The rabbit's name is Albert E.

LORI

Well, it looks like a Trojan condom to me, something you flush down the toilet when you’re done

SULLY

Are condoms supposed to be flushed in the toilet?

MICHAEL

Lori, aren’t you in class?

LORI

This group chat finally turned interesting

LORI

Plus Teach doesn’t mind; she loves me

OLLIE

Does she think you’re evolution’s missing link?

LORI

*finger flipping emoji* Go make your hubby happy already

GABE

Name of this teacher who loves you, Little Wasp!

LORI

Leave her alone, Bez. I’m all yours and Gabe’s

RAMI

Again, NO COUPLE messages in this chat!!

ME

BTW, Albert E. is a hairless guinea pig not a rabbit

LORI

Now I want to flush it even more

Uri makes his way into the living room reminding me I have things to get back to. He’s wearing leather boots, gray jeans, and a cashmere pullover with a V-neck that shows the collar of a white cotton t-shirt underneath. His light brown dreads are up in a pony tail, complementing the barely there brush of stubble over his strong jaw, and making his eyes his most prominent feature. That liquid hazel gaze, large nose, big lips, sharply angled jaw, smooth skin. All those piercings give him a rebellious air. I once had a peek at the end of some ink on his belly. I didn’t know he had tattoos on his body—yet another thing I was unaware of.

His long fingers are wrapped around the boxes he’s holding—how many times have I imagined them curled bruisingly tight around my arms, hips, thighs? Holding me close. Pinning me down. How would he react to me? What kind of voice would he use? What kind of expression would he have? How would it feel? I shouldn’t think about it. But my mind is an endless

ocean of churning thoughts. I can’t stop them, only temporarily push them away.

I slide a couple of books inside the duffle bag on the floor before instinctively grabbing the picture of Uri and me and slip it inside. His eyes follow my movement and then lift to mine with that intense look of his—the same one I see in my countless past memories. The small mole on the rise of his cheek moves as a wolfish grin appears on his face. I send him a hesitant half smile before I turn toward the kitchen. He always makes me feel so aware of myself when I rarely do.

“Why all those boxes? I’m not going to stay long at your place,” I ask him, grabbing the only food present inside the cupboard: tea.

“We’ll see,” he replies cryptically, piling more boxes against the wall near the entrance. Albert E. is inside his cage, a thick, red cloth covers it.

Why do I suddenly feel like a little fly getting caught in a spider’s web? I shake off the unsettling sensation and put the tea into the bag.

“Have everything?”

I look around to double-check.

“Don’t worry, the rest will come in a couple of days with the moving truck.”

“Moving truck?” *What is he talking about?* “Uri, I’m going to crash at your place for a few days, a week tops.”

“Rats and their droppings can carry several diseases, plus when they enter the apartment, they’ll gnaw their way through everything, damaging all your possessions.”

The disease part is the main reason for my moving, and now also the image of gnawed books. Uri knows how much I value them. Don’t want them turned into chew toys. “But will all this fit inside your place?” I haven’t been to his lake house yet, don’t know how big it is.

“Don’t you trust me anymore, Baby Blue?”

That’s the million-dollar question. Do I? I close my eyes for a moment, letting the endearment echo inside my head. Reality, though, comes inexorably back.

“How was meeting your biological brother—Ezra—for the first time?” I ask him. Rami told me about it. Rami did, not Uri. A sense of bitterness starts forming inside my gut. My chest tightens, and I try to grasp that one emotion tangled up in the complex web of feelings I constantly feel for him.

He grabs the bags from my hands. Albert E.’s cage, and a couple more things from the floor as he leads me toward the front door, replying to my question only when we enter the elevator.

“Uneventful. But it’s too early to say anything.”

The twisted sensation at the bottom of my stomach worsens at the hint of interest on his face when talking about his biological brother. His answer is far from satisfying, but I can’t seem to get out another word. My teeth are grinding. I feel so damn…irked. Has it always been like this between us? He doesn’t inform me because he thinks that I can’t be of any help. Too weak. It almost makes me feel like an outsider.

I cross my arms, not able to enjoy the soft fabric of my cowl-neck sweater against my wrists. Uri suddenly pulls on my braid. I’m barely able to stifle the moan about to leave my lips. I was so lost in my angry thoughts, I didn’t realize the elevator stopped in the underground parking.

“What’s wrong?” Uri drops the bags on the ground, pushing his knuckle under my chin to tilt my head up and meet my eyes. I weakly try to shake my head, but his thumb makes me freeze. It’s stroking my chin, tip brushing my lower lip. I’m spellbound. My heart is pounding as my breath gets caught inside my lungs.

Does he have any idea how easily he can enthrall me? His scent alone is getting me high. He shifts those light cinnamon brown eyes to me, and I’m his. It doesn’t mean anything though…not to him.

“I just feel…a little unsettled by the change,” I utter. Which is the truth, or part of it. He’s the catalyst of my disruption, always provoking significant changes in my emotions.

He stares at me for a few more seconds, his gaze nearly piercing a hole in my head. I see his jaw tick, and I'm waiting for more questions. But he lets my chin go and grabs the bags and cage from the floor instead. We make our way across the underground parking to his big car.

I spend most of the ride on my phone talking to Sandy, my PA. We are going through my calendar for next month. There are a few lectures and appearances at a gala and a charity ball. Raph said I need to promote our research company more, that people need to hear science. I think this is his not very subtle way of getting me out of the labs—Michael thinks I'm overworked. Since my whole family is saying it, maybe there's something there. So I don't mind meeting people and shaking hands. A lot of changes these days.

I look at Uri confidently driving this monster of a car. His fingers wrap around the wheel as he stops in front of a metal gate. He passes Serena's face scanner, and after the gates open, steers us down the driveway. The house appearing in front of me is gorgeous. It's made of wood and gray stones, almost blending with the natural surroundings and featuring large, tall windows. There's a covered porch going all around the building, perfect for enjoying outdoor dining and the lake view. Hummingbird feeders are hanging from the porch posts, adding a touch of sweet nature to the exterior.

Uri parks the car in front of the garage, and from here I can see a fire pit near the large dock on the lake.

"Welcome home," he utters before getting out of the car. Such a sweet statement coming from his lips, it makes me shiver not from the cold but anxiousness, for some weird reason. I open the passenger door and place my foot on the step, ready to slide down to the ground. But just as I'm starting the ungraceful descent, Uri appears. He grabs my hips, gliding his hands under my white down jacket and lifts me in the air before slowly letting my body slide down against his until my feet touch the ground.

The light shade of his eyes seems darker—must be a trick of the afternoon light. I can feel the warmth of his hands through the layers of clothes like brands imprinting on my bare skin. It takes only a few seconds to deposit me on the ground, but it's enough to start a blazing fire inside me. I swallow

as my gaze fixes on his lips. His pierced tongue comes out, slicking the plump flesh, and my mind just stops working for a moment.

A distant quack makes me blink, breaking the spell. Uri turns his head in the direction of the lake, and I see a couple of ducks with their green and black feathers taking advantage of an area with less current.

“Let’s go. It’s too cold for you out here.” He grabs my stuff and heads for the front door.

I follow him inside after he goes through another house security check. There’s a lovely, old wood-burning stove in the entryway in perfect condition. The smell of burning logs and the warmth coming from it makes me shudder with delight. I look up, and my lips part at the sight in front of me.

It’s a courtyard surrounded by glass walls. A very old tree is situated in the middle, its skeletal branches reaching in all directions are covered in snow—the whole area is. I can see myself reading one of my books under those boughs when a milder season allows.

“It’s a pomegranate tree,” Uri lets me know.

“Really? My favorite!” I turn to beam at him.

“I know.” The small satisfied smile on his lips tells me everything. He did this for me. I always thought that his attentiveness toward me was guided by gratification. His. He seems to feel pleased when satisfying my needs and desires. It kills me every time.

I focus my attention around me as I make my way down the corridor and into a solarium. The decor is modern, slick, and polished, seemingly untouched since Uri bought the place only last year. I don’t think he has spent much time here, considering the lack of life anywhere in this place. There are some sepia-toned photographs on the walls, and other little touches like a vintage jukebox, shelves covered in books with very familiar titles, and some potted plants—all things *I* like.

He keeps going into the next room. It’s a living room with a huge TV, a comfy-looking sofa, gently colored, soft rugs, and a stone fireplace. In the

corner, there's quite a large cage—there was another one in the solarium.

"It's for Albert E.," Uri answers my silent question as he catches me staring. "I put one in every room in case you want to take your pet with you."

I know this isn't for Albert E. He doesn't approve of him. If it was up to Uri, he'd drop my hairless guinea pig into the sewer. He did this once again for me. And that's another stab to my already bleeding heart. How can I get over him if he keeps doing stuff like this?

"Come," he orders as he leaves the room. We pass the large kitchen to stop in front of the next door. It opens to guinea pig heaven.

A metal and plastic fence goes all around the spacious room, the floor is covered in a variety of bedding, tunnels, hiding boxes, and covered areas for Albert E. to retreat to when he feels like he needs a bit of privacy. There are chew sticks, and forage mixes to keep him entertained, a hay rack and even an exercise area with three different wheels.

"The room is kept between 65 and 79 degrees Fahrenheit with good ventilation. A pet service will clean the room twice a week and rotate toys and hideaways every week to keep the environment stimulating," he says.

The longer I'm with Uri, the deeper I fall in love with him. But how much more profound can the bitter-sweet fall be? Is there even a bottom? A maximum, an end to this love?

"This is…truly amazing. Thank you."

Uri gives me a light nod, then bends down to remove the cloth from the cage. Albert E. is crumpled up in the corner, his pink body shaking, little nose sniffing the air.

"Hey, Albert E., Uncle Uri bought you a mansion, and we are so grateful to him, aren't we?" I glance at Uri's unimpressed face with a smile before returning my attention to my scared pet. "Want to come out and see? You're going to love it." I take the cage from his hands and set it in the center of the room. Then I lift the metal latch and open the small door.

“He’ll come out when he’s ready. He needs time to adjust to the new environment,” I tell Uri.

He leads me out of the room.

“What’s behind that door?” I ask him, pointing at the one on the right. It’s made of thick metal and there’s a panel near it.

“Your lab.”

I blink a couple of times at his words. “My what?”

Uri doesn’t reply as he’s already going through the biometric scan and retinal scanner to get into the room.

“These strict security protocols are in place to keep your research safe, only you and I can enter.”

When he opens the door, the pungent smell of acetone and ether invades my nostrils. This lab is huge. There are three long, slick workbenches where I can perform my experiments and a storage area already half filled with materials. Microscopes, centrifuges, spectrometers, incubators, and more instruments are lying on a polished counter near the left wall. Test tubes and shiny beakers of different sizes are lined up on top of metal trays. There’s even a desk with a brand-new laptop and some empty files ideal for data analysis, report writing, and other administrative tasks. But it’s the glass wall with a view of the forest that makes me realize Uri created my perfect lab. I’d described it to him when I was still studying in college. I couldn’t have one exactly how I imagined at Bare-Stone Labs, not even at the base since I had to share my space with others—researchers or brothers.

But he remembered. Uri remembered, and made my dream come true—the IR spectrometer and the HPLC machine, the pale pink lab coat with my name on it hanging from the coat hanger, the cute, fuzzy slippers, the white board covering the entirety of one wall ready to be filled with my thoughts, even the mini fridge full of Lemon Squash soda cans.

“I got the safety features to protect you from potential hazards, the fume hoods, the biosafety cabinets, and even an emergency shower behind that door.” He gazes at the one on the right I didn’t even notice. “This remote controls the electrical shades that cover the whole glass wall.” He lifts it up

and shows me which button slides them down and up. Then puts the remote down to grab another. “While this one controls the brightness of the lights all over the room.”

I can’t stand it anymore; I hook my hands behind his head and push my face against his soft sweater, giving him a tight hug. His sandalwood scent fills my lungs, and mixed with the sharp smell of the room, it must be what heaven must smell like. His arms wrap around me instantly, and I feel his lips land on the top of my head. It's too good; it starts a tingling sensation in my lower region. I don’t want to embarrass myself so I push against his hard pecs, and he lets me go—after a couple of long seconds.

The whirling emotions inside my chest are choking me. “I can’t believe… Thank you.” I raise my glassy eyes to his, attempting so hard at keeping the overwhelming tears back.

His expression doesn’t show anything, but his thumb moves to my cheek to scoop up a runaway tear. He stares at it for a moment with a deep frown on his face.

“Is there something wrong with the lab? Something you want to change?”

It’s easy to forget at times how difficult it is for Uri to recognize other people’s feelings since he’s so good at pretending.

I shake my head. “It’s perfect.” *You are perfect.* He really is to me.

Uri brings his thumb to his lips and sucks my tear away from the tip, making my guts twist with desire. How much I want to bite that tip and then be punished for it. Oh, God. How disgusted would Uri be if he could read my thoughts?

He guides me out of the room, and after grabbing my bags from the corridor, we move toward the stairs.

We pass two more doors. “This opens to the back porch where there’s a hot tub, and this is to the indoor pool,” he lets me know. Wow, this house has everything.

The second floor cream walls are covered in large pictures of the lake in different seasons. There’s two bedrooms, and a large, open room with a

terrace facing the lake. Uri enters the first room, which has a closet—the biggest one I've ever seen.

The Baby Blue Eyes flowers on the door panels capture my gaze, making it watery again. It's like he renovated this place with me in mind. Does this mean he wants me to live here…permanently? His overprotectiveness knows no bounds—I'm well aware of that. And even though I know this was not done out of love, the idea of living with Uri again fills me with so much joy and longing…and sadness.

"I love it," I whisper; my words are filled with gratitude and appreciation as I brush my fingers over the delicately painted blue petals. Another tear falls down my cheek, but I wipe it off before Uri can do anything—if he touches me right now, I feel like I'd confess to him all my suppressed emotions.

I clear my voice. "Where's the bed?" I ask him, gazing at the cute silver settee and the inviting chaise lounge.

"In the bedroom," Uri states, while leaving the bags on the floor. "This is the walk-in closet; the bed is this way." He signals me to follow him. Oh, but that means there's only one bedroom, unless there's more in another part of the house.

The room next door has one violet-blue wall, a large chest of drawers, a cute love seat, huge French windows opening onto a wide balcony—he knows I don't like confined spaces after being trapped in that cell all those years—an ensuite bathroom, and a huge king bed. Particles of Uri's rich smell are floating in the air. I can see a pair of his jeans draped over the back of the love seat and some of his earrings on the nightstand on the left side of the bed.

"This is your bedroom," I exclaim, remaining on the threshold.

"Our bedroom," he counters, cool as a cucumber.

"Our…bedroom?" I repeat like a parrot. I look at his unfazed expression, confused.

He sits at the foot of the bed and starts to take off his boots and socks. "We used to sleep together."

“When we were kids,” I remind him.

“Is there another bedroom downstairs?” Or was I mistaken once again, and my staying here is evidently temporary.

“We always sleep together when under the same roof.”

That hasn’t happened in months, though. “I know, but…”

“But what?” He looks annoyed now. Almost on a warpath.

“Nothing. Okay,” I yield. I know there’s no point in arguing with him.

“Unpack while I take a shower.” He disappears behind the bathroom door, leaving me utterly speechless. I’d love to know what’s going on in his mystifying mind, but I’m also afraid of all the darkness existing there.

He’s dominating my every thought again, and I’m living with him. Am I crazy? I must be because I haven’t even taken into consideration to stay with another brother. He was the first and only option for me.

I turn around and go back to the walk-in closet to empty my bags and put my clothes away. Now that I think about it, I’ve never seen Uri’s body bare—not since he was around seventeen. I know he’s not a prude, because he did some modeling before that—I still have all the magazines and catalogs featuring him. He suddenly stopped, though, and started stock trading. He has the body and the brains, and he’s so confident and unapologetic—my complete opposite. I really don’t know why he wastes his time protecting me.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m on the first floor in the kitchen making myself a green tea. I’m still in a daze because of what I found inside the closets and drawers upstairs—so many clothes and accessories they made my head spin—when he comes in wearing a pair of gray sweats and a long-sleeve, black cotton shirt.

I don’t ask him if he wants one. He hates tea, more of a black coffee guy. So I pour a fresh one and place it on the round table. The kitchen—just like the rest of the house—is fantastic. Lemon chiffon cabinets and drawers, and stainless steel counters, appliances, and stove. Unfortunately I don’t cook, and neither does Uri.

He sits on the chair next to mine and slides the coffee mug toward his chest.

“What’s this?” I ask him when he leaves a black bracelet near my tea cup.

“Rami made it.” He takes a sip from his mug before putting it down and grabbing my wrist. He moves my sweater sleeve up, brushing my skin with his fingers. Then he wraps the bracelet around my wrist. I feel the black band tighten and then a click.

“It monitors your vital signs. It notices sudden rises in your pulse rate, body temperature, and breathing.”

Joy, another controlling device to track my every move. It’s like a shackle, the feel of it on my skin reminds me how weak and defenseless my brothers think of me. They are really impossible at times.

“I don’t need it. I already have the tracker behind my ear and in my phone. Take it off.” I huff pulling at it, but the bracelet doesn’t move. “Where’s the clasp?” I don’t see it.

“There’s a key to open it and I have it. Only me.”

“And you have no intention of taking it off.”

“No. You need it.”

“No I don’t. But you see me as the weakest in need of extra monitoring,” I clip, still trying to take the contraption off.

“No, Sully is the weakest,” he calmly replies, stopping my hand by curling his around it and then placing our laced fingers on the table. The hold soothes me, but I don’t know if he’s patronizing me or using his sociopathic condition as a dumb card—wouldn’t be the first time. I don’t like either possibility.

“Give me the key!” I snap.

“No.”

I snatch the tea mug from the table and take a big sip, forgetting for a moment how hot it is.

“Mmm!” I moan, feeling the blazing beverage burn my tongue and inner mouth before it goes down my throat like searing lava.

His large hands are suddenly on my cheeks, forcing my mouth open.

“Your tongue is red,” he snarls, sending a murderous glare at my cup of tea before moving to the fridge to get a small bottle of water.

I stretch my hand out, craving the sensation of fresh water on my burned skin, but Uri doesn’t give it to me. He unscrews the lid and then drinks it himself. Before I even realize what is happening he bends down, pries my lips apart, and then feeds me the cold water from his mouth to mine. His lips are warm and soft against mine while the metal hoop around the lower one feels cool, cooler than the water filling my mouth. It drips down my chin and neck, but I don’t care. The light stinging pain mixed with his warm touch and wet mouth feel so damn perfect, my dick hardens.

He moves away, deep eyes scanning my face.

“More?” His raspy voice makes me swallow hard, and I can only nod while I look at his Adam’s apple bobbing as he takes another long sip.

He repeats the action two more times. His tongue strokes against mine, a heavy rub that makes my butthole clench eagerly around nothing. I feel an unbearable throbbing sensation in the pit of my stomach when he abruptly pulls away.

“You need to suck on some ice,” he states calmly.

Words elude me as I’m still processing what just happened.

Uri’s phone rings on the tabletop, making me jump with nerves. I see the name of one of his restaurants on the screen. As he picks up and talks composedly, I feel a sense of uneasiness crawling inside me. I’m about to pass out, while he cooly discusses lighting and tables.

I gesture to him that I’m going upstairs, and on unstable legs I get out, climb the stairs, and reach his bedroom. I close the door behind me and lean heavily against it.

What the hell was that? Uri is so…confusing. Every little word he tosses my way, the ways he stays close and does things for me…things like THIS! Why? Why did he do it? It means something, right? I'm crap at reading people's behavior. I need an objective point of view, an expert in deciphering intentions, someone who knows Uri well, someone with a straightforward and unembellished approach. Lori. I need Lori.

Shit! I left my phone in the kitchen, and I have no strength left to face Uri again right now. Letting out a long sigh, I move toward my laptop. Echoes of lust and desire are twirling in my guts. My dick turns harder as I brush my fingers over my lips, recalling what it felt like to have Uri's lips on mine once again.

I left my dildo at home, couldn't pack it with Uri hovering over me. Should I get another one? I could send it to my office and then bring it here.

I look for the same website I bought my other one from. I open the page and see different models. It excites me, the memory of it inside me. I read somewhere that the first time could be painful if the bottom is not used to it. So I decided to give my body some prep while I was dating Trent—we never got that far, though. But I kept using it since it felt kind of good.

Should I buy a bigger one? And what's that? My eyes are caught by a chain with two clamps at each end. Nipple clamps. My nipples respond instantly, turning as hard as rocks at the sight. And what's a Dragon Skin Seven Piece Bondage Set? I read the small description: *This fantasy-inspired ensemble invites you to explore the realm of power dynamics and intimate submission. Unveil an array of pleasures with this comprehensive set, featuring an eye mask, fully adjustable cuffs, hogtie restraints, and a whip for sensual discipline. Experience the art of submission.*

My eyes focus on the whip and the restraints. And for a moment, I imagine myself diving into a dark world of thrilling, sensual submission. My whole body is shaken by a delicious shudder. It reminds me of that video I stumbled on a while ago. Two men enjoying BDSM sex. Leather cuffs, a blindfold, kneeling. I close my eyes as all the blood rushes down to my dick. My hand slowly moves toward it when I remember Uri is downstairs.

I quickly buy a slightly bigger dildo and close the laptop. Then I take a long shower, using thoughts of my ongoing research to deplete my erection. After donning an old t-shirt and a pair of soft pants, I slide under the sheets.

I fall asleep more quickly than I expected, and soon dream of someone spooning me. Wet lips caress my neck. Warm hands explore my chest and sides. A rough voice whispers deliciously filthy, possessive words in my ear. My aching cock remains untouched, but the grunts turn more savage as I feel a hard shaft rubbing between my cotton-clad ass cheeks.

When I wake up the next morning, I know I had a wet dream—my panties are a mess. There’s no sign of Uri, but the crumpled duvet on his side tells me he spent the night right next to me.

I can smell his scent on me.

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# four

SARIEL

I walk down the white hospital corridor. The silence is disrupted only by the sound of my heels hitting the epoxy floor—I regret wearing these shoes; they are pretty but not fit for a hospital. This is the coma patient wing, therefore the hushed atmosphere is the norm here.

I stop my advance as I see Ollie and Rague just outside Meg's room. Ollie has his back against the wall, legs wrapped around my brother's waist. Rague is looming over his husband without taking his attention away for even a second. His grip on Ollie's throat is tight, but relaxed, his thumb smoothing slowly over the skin. Ollie's body loosens further with every word Rague softly utters while tracking Ollie's every reaction. Their lips move closer, and I suddenly avert my curious eyes from the intensely sensual exchange, giving the lovers some privacy.

"Hey, Sari!" Ollie calls out a moment later, making me turn to look at them again. He's sliding down Rague's body as he gestures me closer.

"Hi, guys. Everything okay?"

Rague nods; he's not very talkative, but I like that about him.

"Did you like the lake house?" Ollie asks. I know Uri hired them to make the changes, he wouldn't trust anybody else. Rague built and renovated all his restaurants.

“Love it! Thank you.” I smile at them, noticing how Ollie holds onto Rague’s bicep while lacing their fingers together.

“You should thank Uri. He’s been more insufferable than usual,” Rague mutters.

“He wanted everything perfect for you.” Ollie smirks at me.

Now that I think about it, hadn’t he started the renovation a month ago? The rat infestation happened only two days ago. He was probably planning to invite me to the lake house over summer, since he knows how much I like to splash around in the water.

“How’s Meg?” I ask them.

“Her cheeks look…rosier,” Ollie hazards, and then adds with a heavy tone. “Linda…no change.”

She’s been glued to her wife’s hospital bed since she fell into a coma. Only goes back home to shower and make phone calls to her contacts, busy trying to find Phoenix. She is looking for her revenge, and she won’t stop until she’s punished the culprit—none of us will.

Meg is our mother, not by blood, but in all the other important aspects. With Linda, she gave us a home when we needed it the most, love, acceptance, help, and support. When I was younger, I couldn’t understand how someone not even blood related could be so affectionate toward me, so patient and understanding. I never met my parents. I was abandoned near a hospital and spent my first years in a group home before those horrible scientists took me away.

I hadn’t known what love was before I met my mothers and my brothers. I owe them all that I am. That’s why I let them baby me most of the time. My eyes fall to the black bracelet around my wrist.

“We need to go. See ya later.” Ollie squeezes my hand, as Rague lands a pat on my shoulder.

I move to the door and push it open, entering Meg’s hospital room. It’s a private VIP room—she’s given hefty donations to this hospital, plus Linda is friends with an administrator.

“Sari. How are you, kid?” Linda leaves the chair near the bed to come hug me. Her lemony scent reminds me of happy memories and warm nights. *Kid*. That’s how Meg calls me. Calls all of her kids.

“I’m okay,” I mumble against her shoulder.

She pulls back, and when her eyes fall on my face, her brows go up in question. “What happened?”

I can never hide anything from her. Being a retired secret agent doesn’t mean she lost her sharpness.

I try to feign serenity, mostly because I don’t want to think about Uri again. “Nothing.”

I left the lake house before he came back this morning. It’s kind of weird that my phone is not exploding with calls and texts from him right now.

“I want to check on Meg,” I tell her, slightly tightening my grip on her forearms.

She studies my face for a moment and then nods, letting me walk near the bed.

The tracheal tube coming out of her mouth seems fine; it makes her chest expand and deflate. Ollie was right. Her cheeks look pink today. I grab the chart and check the doses of the treatment she’s receiving. Everything looks in order. Then I move near the drip line to make sure the liquid is running smoothly through the tubes.

Linda has a brush in her hand and is running it through Meg’s salt-and-pepper hair. The white streaks have spread while she’s lying in this bed. I grab her hand—feels warm, the fingers knotted with that little bump on her middle finger from all the writing.

“Any episodes?” I ask. Meg had some convulsions a couple of weeks ago caused by electrolyte imbalances.

“No.” Linda caresses her head gently. “She’s been sleeping like Snow White.”

“Are we the Seven Dwarves then?” I ask, hoping to see another smile on Linda’s face.

She sniffs. “More like goblins.”

She’s probably right. We are still a handful. I let the white coat slide down my shoulders and place it on the small sofa near the window. The view to the snowy back garden is placid. There are a few patients strolling around, a couple of doctors smoking near the metal ashtrays, and a jogger running with her dog on a leash—the black collar around its neck reminds me of the nipple clamp I saw yesterday on that website.

“Spit it out, Sari.”

When I turn around, Linda is seated in the chair near the bed again. Her fingers crossed on her lap. Back straight. Watchful eyes fixed on me. That’s the pose she used to give us as kids to force out a confession—like who’d cracked the Ming dynasty vase in the entrance or set the Persian rug in the library on fire or recorded a video of our neighbor’s son beating the gardener and sent it to the police. She was quite proud of the last one. The pose has never failed. It’s still kind of intimidating after all these years.

“Do you think I’m weak?” I ask, letting yesterday’s upsetting mood get a hold on me again.

“Of course not. I’ve always thought you are the strongest among your brothers.”

I gasp. I need a moment to process her words. “The fact that I don’t feel the need to kill is seen as something uncanny in this family.”

She hums. “Maybe. But what happened to every one of you made you… peculiar. Each of you found a way to cope. Most of you kill for revenge, need, enjoyment—doesn’t really matter. Have you found your way to cope, yet?”

“Work on my research?” It’s more a question than a statement.

“That’s work. I’m talking about pleasure. About that something that makes you shudder with anticipation and urge you to let go of everything else.” She smiles expectantly.

“I…I th-think it’s pain.” I squeeze my eyes closed after the admission. It’s the first time I’ve said it out loud, and I’m terrified.

Linda doesn’t make me wait long. “I’m pretty sure you don’t mean causing pain. So it’s being in pain.”

I keep my eyes down as I nod, the gesture is filled with hesitation.

“Seeing donors suffering makes my stomach quiver most of the time. But the thought of feeling it…it excites me.” I finally lift my eyes to her. There’s no trace of judgment on her blank face.

“Pain is the best teacher, they say, because through it you find out what kind of person you are. Your limits, your strength, your resistance.” She doesn’t seem surprised.

A sudden doubt overwhelms me. “Did you already know?”

“I know everything about my sons.” She smirks. “Meg had a suspicion. She wasn’t sure, though.”

I grab my braid and pull at it, feeling anxious and naked under her sharp blue eyes.

“Was she disappointed?” I whisper, so very scared about Linda’s reply.

“Never.” Her answer is quick and resolute. “But she was worried.”

“I’ve never…actually done it, but I want to try.”

“So, go out there and experience it. You’ll never know if you don’t.” She makes it sound so easy.

“Are you not disgusted?” I need more reassurance from her. That makes me feel really weak and pathetic.

“Sari, you should know by now that I’m not what society would call a fit mother. But I gave my precious sons the tools they needed to live a full life, with no fear. Keep that head high and go your own way.”

“But after all the hurt I suffered when I was a kid, the torture, how can I crave pain now? There must be something really wrong with me.” I feel tears running down my face as I drop down on the chair on the other side of

Meg’s bed. How could she have accepted me? How can Linda, or worse… Uri?

Linda slowly leans toward me, placing her elbows on her thighs. “You lived through a horrifying experience, Sari. Nobody would come out of it unscathed. I can’t use psychological terminology—that’s Meg’s expertise—but the way I see it, this is your way of dealing with all that agonizing shit. A means of adaption, a survival strategy. Because by now you know how justice is so very unjust.”

“A defense mechanism?” I’ve never seen it this way.

“Call it what you want. Rationalizing it won’t make those dark thoughts disappear. You need to explore and see what happens, just like your brothers did with killing. But share the experience with someone you trust completely.”

“Dating has been quite hard.” I sniff and wipe my wet cheeks with the long sleeve of my sweater.

“That’s strange. Whatever Uri aims at, he hits. You know how much he *cares* for you in his own sociopathic way.”

Why is she talking about Uri now? Is it because she knows about my feelings toward him?

“The tea about you and Uri needs to be spilled.”

Tea? Spilled? She knows! Before I can ask her about it, Uri arrives, followed by Clover.

“Hi there,” Clover greets us. Then he bows at Meg. He said it’s his Japanese way to show his respect for her.

“Hey, Clover, Uri,” I hear Linda say.

I feel Uri’s piercing gaze on me. His brows turned down in a frown. “You cried.”

“It’s nothing,” I dismiss his words, but with two steps, he’s looming over me, hand cupping my chin to study me more closely.

“Nothing? It sure fucking looks like a whole lot of something,” he snaps. “You’re upset and afraid.” I open my mouth to ask him how he knows that, but he adds, “You have a tell.”

“I do?”

“Your nose twitches a little. Plus I heard your conversation with Linda.”

Terror like I haven’t felt in years envelops me. “You-you did?” Oh my God. No! That’s not possible. He can’t know. I frantically try to remember what it was said, but I’m too panic-stricken to make sense of it. He looks furious… with me.

“Yes,” he answers with a snarl. His grip on my face tightens. “It ends today.” His words make my heart sink as all the blood leaves my face.

“Uri—” Linda starts, but I cut her off, not wanting to hear anything more.

“Need to go to the bathroom.”

I bat his hand away and flee out of the room. Tears roll down my face as I rush blindly toward the elevator. This can’t be happening. My worst nightmare has turned into reality. He is already looking at me differently.

*Uriel*

Dark possessiveness has invaded every particle of my body, and the only thing keeping me from going after Sari is the sight of Meg lying in the hospital bed. Nevertheless, I’m enraged thinking about Sari with someone else. *Dating!* That’s what he said to Linda. Fucking dating those motherfuckers, who aren’t even worthy to untie his shoes.

I’m an expert at keeping my tone bland, but when I saw those glassy aquamarine eyes and wet cheeks, and the way he pulled nervously on his braid, a growl was ripped out of my throat.

So fucking beautiful when he’s upset. I wanted to pull him so close we’d merge into a single being. But he swatted my hand away. It makes the anger in the pit of my stomach boil and sear.

“Is it just me, or is Uri kind of hot when he’s being all sociopathic?” Clover stage whispers. I met him in the lobby. He was eating a bag of pretzels and kept talking all the way up to Meg’s room. I’m very tempted to end his life, finding another thief like him won’t be that difficult, everyone is expendable. But Sari seems to like him. There’s also the matter of the family code. Damn it!

I move closer to the bed to look at Meg. The sound of the ventilator pumping air inside her lungs makes me uneasy. The fact that I wasn’t able to protect her adds fuel to the fire. The biggest fear for us sociopaths is losing something. Meg and Sari are my something—my brothers and Linda can take care of themselves.

All I want right now is to find who did this and shoot both their legs and arms until there’s more holes than smooth skin, then carefully, but painfully rip their still beating heart out of their chest and crush it under my boot.

Emotions are so confusing. Revenge, on the other hand, is exquisite.

“I heard Ezra came to see you,” Linda interrupts my enjoyably gory thoughts.

“Your doppelgänger?” Clover asks. Fuck, he’s a great thief but such a weird human being.

“His twin.” Linda huffs. She’s tiny, with long blond hair and blue deep eyes, but I’ve never made the mistake of underestimating her.

“He snuck inside the lake house. That was his last time, though. Serena now knows how to differentiate between us.”

“Rami told me. How was meeting him after all this time?”

“Awesome, I bet. A guy with my exact face. So many things we could do! The possibilities are endless,” Clover interjects. I have no fucking idea what he’s on about. But having another little Asian Ninja thief running around would be too fucking much for me. I’d be forced to kill one or both.

I take out my switchblade and start the usual toss and catch, keeping a sharp gaze on Clover. “It was fucking unsettling at first; I wanted to shoot him.” I give them a wicked smirk. “But it seems like he has information regarding Phoenix.”

“So you decided to postpone killing your twin,” Clover says.

“That seems wise,” Linda utters slowly. “Just listen to what he has to say. He’s better alive than dead to us for now. The enemy of our enemy is our friend. And I don’t think Ezra wants us dead.”

I grab the knife and use the tip of the blade to scratch my chin. “It seems not. But that can easily change. I don’t know his intentions, yet. Sure as shit they aren’t pure.”

“Possibly. We don’t know much about him.”

It looks like he was kept by those scientists at least three more years after the rest of us were saved. We don’t know what happened after that. Now Ezra is an assassin, but under no one’s control. So, did he escape and was found by someone like my foster mothers? Meg and Linda are the ones who thaught me to give and take, to control myself, they put up boundaries when it was needed, and changed their approach as I grew up. Meg even showed us the files and dossiers about us that she’d compiled over the years. She wanted us to understand some of the decisions she and Linda had made and the approach they chose with each one of us.

The thing about psychopaths and sociopaths, though, is that there’s no actual approach or technique to keep us from turning into whoever we’ll become. All psychopaths or sociopaths can be dangerous, even if we aren’t all murderers. We are still cannons ready to shoot; Meg and Linda simply turned our aim toward evil fuckers.

They raised five kids out of seven to become murderous vigilantes. I see that as a victory since I fucking like my life. I am a sociopath. They didn’t change that. Couldn’t. I’ll always have a lack of empathy for others, an impulsive nature; I’ll attempt to control others with threats or aggression, or use intelligence, charm, or charisma to manipulate them; I’ll lie for personal gain and show a tendency toward violence. It’s who I am. And fuck, I’m proud of myself.

“We know close to nothing about Ezra’s past except that he left the second facility somehow. Rami’s still digging, but it’s like looking for a ghost. He keeps following us around like a shadow and easily breaks into our houses, not in the least afraid of us.”

“He’s also an assassin,” Clover adds. Lori must have blown the whistle. “Not that that fact would make any difference in this family.”

“It doesn’t.” I find it sort of cool, actually. “Ezra is good at keeping himself in check. He seems very interested in our family. But I can’t make an accurate assessment of him. He doesn’t conceal his nature, but he cautiously and deviously weighs every word he says.”

“From what I’ve seen of him, he’s not going to tell us anything unless he wants to. He’s as stubborn as you are, and as wild.” She smirks my way.

“Manic you mean.” Clover doesn’t know when to shut up.

“Are you trying to get killed today?” I threaten him, pointing my switchblade at him.

He swiftly moves behind Linda’s back. He ducks down since she’s sitting, peering at me over her shoulder. She doesn’t look happy about it.

“Make your kid behave, Linda,” he squawks. I know he can easily defend himself. I’ve seen him dodging blades and punches before. What is he playing at?

“Why would I do that?” She snorts.

Her uncaring response and Clover's confused expression satisfy me enough. I flip the blade in and pocket the sharp weapon once again. Sari gave it to me a few years back, after hearing me argue with Gabe about how guns can become empty while knives are always sharp. Horseshit, if you ask me. But Sari took it seriously, and the next day he came to me holding this switchblade—with my name engraved on the blade. He made me promise to always carry it with me. Which I do, wherever I go.

Where the hell is he? I turn toward the door with the intention of going to look for him, but Linda’s next words stop me.

“A rat infestation in Sari’s luxury building. I find it very strange.” She’s staring too intently at me, while I can see Clover biting his mouth, finding the view outside the window too interesting.

I raise a challenging brow at her. I don’t know what she expects from me, and I don’t particularly care.

She sighs. “Stop with the behind-the-curtain crap and strap on a pair, Uri.”

“Of what? Sneakers?” Clover asks moronically.

“You shush,” she orders him. “A relationship with no argument is a relationship with too many secrets, or are you scared to show who you really are?” Linda taunts me.

“Bullshit. Sari knows very well who I am.” He just needs to remember that if there’s one thing that upsets a highly narcissistic sociopath, it is being ignored or pushed away. I must absolutely have his undivided attention. He is mine, to be used as I wish, when I wish.

“You developed a kind of fixation on him. Overprotective. Obsessed. With stalkerish tendencies—which in your case are not romantic nor flattering. Sociopaths are characterized by volatile behavioral patterns. Nevertheless, Sari has always been your only constant.”

“I was never subtle about it.” I tsk.

“True. You have a glimmer in your eyes when you look at Sari. A sparkle of madness that shows when you think or talk about him. We saw it early on. When as a kid you’d sneak inside his room to sleep with him, or that time we had to repaint your room after Sari covered the walls with algebra formulas, and you didn’t get upset. Not even a little. Instead, you asked to leave them as they were. Meg and I actually have a bet going on.” Linda uses the present tense. Meg is technically still alive, but the more time passes, the less chance of survival she has.

“I’m not surprised about the shared bet.” It’s a big thing in my family.

“My day is coming soon, so close the deal asap.”

“I’m so confused, aren’t you and Sari brothers?” Clover asks. “And can I lay a wager too?”

“That’s your takeaway from everything we just said?” Linda shakes her head at him. “Can you believe this guy?” Then she smiles at Meg. She keeps talking to her, knowing very well she can’t hear us. Why waste breath?

“Sari is very affectionate and kind. He’s got that subtle clumsiness which is cute, an unwavering inner strength fueled by his delicate innocence that draws people to him, especially predators looking to harm him.”

I’m glaring at Clover. “How closely have you been looking at Sari to discern all this?”

“I’m a thief. Reading people and looking for details is part of my job.” He shrugs dismissively at me.

Finally my Baby Blue walks back into the room. He has a couple of plastic bags and is avoiding my eyes.

“I grabbed some burgers from the cafeteria and some ice cream,” he says, placing them on the table near the window.

I walk toward it and take the chair near him. I won’t give him any more space. As we start eating, Linda and Clover keep up a light conversation, while Sari seems very focused on his burger.

The way he eats an overly big bite and tilts his head back using gravity to push the food between his lips makes my dick stand at attention as I imagine giving him something else to feed on. It gets even harder as he pushes his heavy braid behind his back when it falls on his shoulder, and I fantasize about wrapping it around my wrist as I pump relentlessly inside him.

When he starts eating ice cream and sucks on the spoon, moaning all his pleasure, completely oblivious to the effect he has on me, I feel the need to grab him by the neck and make him kneel at my feet. Linda’s smug gaze piercing my head halts my dirty thoughts.

I won’t close any deal with Sari. But he’s already mine, and I take care of what belongs to me. I’ll keep him close. Nobody will touch him.

No-bo-dy.

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# five

SARIEL

“This is Lori the Magnificent, what can’t I do for you?”

I roll my eyes at the way he answers the phone. “It’s Sari.”

“Hey, Angel. I’m having an Irish coffee with Ollie, want to join us?”

“I can’t. I’m at work.” I check the door of my lab, but Uri is still in Raph’s office.

“I need a favor.”

He hums. “I’ll do it if you give me something in exchange.”

“Just do it, Lor,” I hear Ollie scold him.

“Shush!”

“What do you want from me?” I ask.

“It’s pretty easy. Kiss a guy in front of Uri.”

Saliva goes into the wrong tube, and I start coughing.

“Look what you’ve done? That’s pretty shitty even for you,” Ollie barks at Lori over the line.

“That’s an oxymoron. Shit cannot be pretty,” Lori snaps back.

“That’s horribly shitty of you, then.”

“How dare you!”

When I’m able to breathe normally again, I question Lori, “Why do you want me to kiss a guy in front of Uri?”

“I’m tired of waiting. You both have enough pent-up sexual energy to power Chicago!” he huffs.

Is he suggesting that Uri and I…we… “I-I can’t do that! I want you to take me away from him…for the night. Tonight.” I gesture animatedly while talking.

“Did something happen?” Ollie sounds worried, which is the last thing I want. A few minutes, and all my brothers will converge here to find out who dared upset me.

“Beats me if I know what is going on between those two!” Lori mutters.

“I just need some fun time,” I hurriedly get out.

“Away from Uri?” Ollie’s voice is skeptical. *Crap!*

“I get it, Angel. *A-holes be crazy.*” Lori saves me from answering. “Bugger! This goes against my bet,” I think I hear him mumble.

“Who cares?” Ollie counters. “This is more important than a bet.”

*What bet?* My brothers are always laying wagers on…anything. I can barely keep up.

“Alright. I can never say no to you, it would be like committing sacrilege against a celestial being.” His silly statement still lifts a weight off my shoulders.

I’m running away from Uri; it’s childish and cowardly. But since he eavesdropped on my conversation with Linda at the hospital yesterday, I feel like there’s an insurmountable brick wall between us. A wall I don’t feel ready to face, yet.

“Where do you want to go?” Ollie asks.

“A club?” But I’m not in the mood for dancing. “No, a bar. I want to drink.” *And forget.*

“Shitface-night it is. I’ll come with Ollie and bring Michael too. They need to leave their ball-and-chains at home.”

“I’ll tell Gabe you call him that, you fucker.”

“I didn’t, you daft prick. I was referring to your husbands,” Lori responds.

“I dare you to say it to Raph’s face!”

“Are you sure you want to vex me when you need to borrow clothes from my wardrobe for tonight?”

“Fuck! If I die in one of your George Michael short-shorts and crop tops, I’ll be extra pissed off,” Ollie clips.

“Why?” I ask.

“’Coz it will be my ghost attire, and I’ll be stuck in that horror for eternity!”

“Ghosts don’t exist,” I hazard.

“We’ll pick you up from work? I’ll bring a change for you, as well. We’ll be there in an hour and a shake,” Lori lets me know.

“A shake?”

“One long blink and a cha-cha.” Lori keeps confusing me.

“Cha-cha?”

“Quit the nonsense, Lor.” Olli sighs, and I hear an “ouch” followed by a curse. “Be downstairs in an hour.”

Fifty eight minutes later, I’m in the Bear-Stone Labs building lobby with Michael and Raph. Thankfully, Uri had to go check one of his restaurants. He told me to wait for him, which I never had any intention of doing.

While Raph and Michael are shamelessly making out near the elevators, I send Uri a text to let him know I’ll be with the guys tonight—maybe I can ask Ollie to stay at his place. I haven’t seen Sully in a couple of weeks, and

Albert E. will be fine in his big room. I put my phone on silent mode just as I wince at the loud sound of a long honk from outside.

I follow the noise out of the building; the cold weather hits my face, making me pull the collar of my coat up. My eyes find Ollie's Jeep pretty quickly under the yellow light of the lampposts. He's in the driver's seat, trying to bat Lori's hands from the horn.

"Stop it! You're acting crazier than usual." Ollie huffs with exasperation, adjusting his clothes.

Lori leans back into the passenger seat. "Not acting here." He turns on the windshield wipers.

Ollie stops the squeaky sound, glaring at his best friend. "Now it's edging into insanity!"

I open the back door and climb inside the car.

"Edging…I wish!" Lori snorts and then touches the wiper lever again. The squeaky sound is back. "I can never find a windshield wiper setting that truly satisfies me. Too slow, too fast, too discontinuous."

I see Lori's hand moving toward the lever near the wheel again.

"I got it, you're pissed at Bez, but I swear if you touch that switch, I'll… Oww! You bit me." Ollie is rubbing his cotton-clad forearm, sending a murderous look at Lori.

"I'm feral." Lori smirks wickedly at him.

"You should get a shot," Michael giggles, appearing near the car.

"A rabies shot," Raph states, helping his husband into the seat next to mine.

Lori crosses his arms, looking like a capricious child. "Ollie, you can't drive with an injured arm. I'll do it."

He's instantly shot down by everyone in a chorus—including me. Lori's driving is scary. The memory I have of it sends a cold shudder down my spine.

“I’ll take Michael home right now if you even think about driving,” Raph growls, half bent inside the car, stern eyes on Lori.

“You’ll find whatever excuse to lock your hubby up for a rabbit-bonking-long month of Sundays.” Lori passes me the clothes I should wear tonight.

Raph growls low. “Where are you going?”

Nobody answers, so Michael cups my brother’s cheek. “You can track my phone, okay? I’ll text you when I’m ready to come home.”

“You better behave, piglet.” Raph sounds threatening.

But Michael simply smiles excitedly at him.“Oooor?”

“Message him the rest, we are losing light here.”

It’s technically dark already, but I do understand what Ollie means. Raph grabs Michael’s nape and lands a bruising kiss on his lips before turning my way. “Uri is looking for you.” His intense look is reading every single thought inside my head.

“I need this. Keep him away.” I turn my pleading eyes toward my big brother. Will Raph help me? I can’t tell by his blank face.

As soon as he slams the car door, Ollie drives away.

My phone keeps vibrating inside my bag, and I keep ignoring it.

“Bloody hell, talk about clinginess.” Lori makes a pfft sound. “Alright!” He turns toward me and Michael. “Your mission tonight, if you choose to accept it, is to get disgustingly drunk and shake your ass till it does it by itself.”

Ollie lets out a “Whoo-hoo!”

“Now, Sari, we all know you’re a *gaygin*.”

I frown at Lori as I start changing into the clothes he handed me.

“Gay-virgin,” Michael explains. It makes me blush; is it that obvious?

“So, I’ve been thinking—” he keeps going.

“Don’t hurt your mind,” Ollie taunts him.

“Sharp-tongued harpy, give me a little kissy-wissy.” Lori starts making smacking sounds with his lips.

“So you’ll bite my face too? I don’t think so. You’re such a pain in the ass!”

Lori proudly states, “I’m so stunning when others see their own reflections, they puke.”

“You’re right about the puking part; you’re a bit confused about who’s reflection they see.” Another taunt.

“Where are we going?” Michael asks, halting the banter.

“I don’t know, which is very Thelma and Louise of us.” Lori winks in the rearview mirror.

“They die in the end, right?” I don’t really watch TV or go to the movies, so I’m not sure.

“Let’s drive around and stop randomly every five minutes. It will drive our men wild while they’re tracking us.”

“Oh! We can use my stalking kit!”

“Isn’t this Ollie’s car?” Michael asks Lori.

“There’s one in the trunk.”

“What is that doing in my trunk?” Ollie frowns.

“First of all, this is Sully’s Jeep, not yours. And second, none of you crybabies let me drive anymore, so I stashed one in each car.” He shrugs.

“How did you pull that off?” Michael asks.

“I had some external help.”

“Clover,” I guess, pulling my pants down.

“B-I-ngo!” Lori beams, until he sees Ollie. “You look like I ran over your cat.”

“You almost did it once!” Ollie barks.

“Did I? Am I supposed to remember all the animals I ran over?”

“You’re supposed to not do it,” Michael tells him.

“They were mostly sewer rats and cockroaches.”

“The latter are insects,” I tell him.

Lori pouts for a moment. “Okay. Let’s go back to the juicy conversation. Sari, I’ll make it my personal mission to find you a nice, hot bloke to help you get off tonight.”

“For the love of God,” I hear Ollie mutter.

“I’m okay, Lori,” I try. Do I want his help? Maybe I do need it since past experience didn’t go so well.

“It’s going to be easy. Maybe you won’t even need me.”

“I won’t?” I ask hopefully.

“Adorable if naive. You are too unaware of yourself, Angel. I’ll help with the screening process, alright?”

I nod, a bit confused by his words. My phone stopped vibrating. Did Raph distract Uri? Or did Uri get fed up? The last possibility upsets me. I’m such a mess.

“Rami told me about a place the other day,” Michael suddenly says, checking his phone. “It’s a bar not too far from here. I’m sending you the pin.”

“Got it.” Ollie taps on the Jeep’s navigation screen. “I need the booze to do its work. Being sober just leads to murderous thoughts,” Ollie grumbles, sending a glance to his right where Lori is happily humming what sounds like “Livin’ la Vida Loca.”

After fifteen minutes, Ollie parks the red Jeep on the street and we make our way to the bar. The wooden sign reads Wine, Cock, and Beer.

“I dig the name.” Lori winks at me and hooks his arm with mine as we go inside. It’s bigger and nicer than I expected. The lights are dimmed, giving the place a warm glow. The air is sweet and rich, compared to the outside chill. The round bar counter is in the middle of the room and people are sitting in the brown booths or gathered around the high wooden tables surrounding it. The clink of glasses and loud chatter relegate the notes of some pop song to the background.

Lori pulls me toward the bar. The sparkly, white counter—the exact same shade as my nail polish—feels cold under my fingers. The two bartenders look busy as they swiftly prepare one cocktail after another.

I undo the buttons of my coat but leave it on. The clothes Lori’s lent me are beautiful but slightly too revealing for my liking. A very short, leather skirt, black stockings and a soft sweater that leaves part of my belly and one shoulder bare.

“Tequila shots! And keep them coming,” Lori orders, and after a moment eight little glasses appear in front of us.

“Elbows up!” Ollie says, before downing his glass.

This is not my first time having shots with them. I like tequila, it gives me a nice buzz. So I follow their example, and three glasses later, my stomach starts to burn slightly.

A guy slides in next to me, but Lori raises his arm to push him away. “Come back in ten minutes. He needs to drink more.” He winks, and the guy nods and leaves but not before sending me a heated look.

“What just happened?”

“First rule of hooking up,” Ollie raises one finger, “if he comes back, it means he’s really interested in you. If he doesn’t, it’s his loss.”

“I want to drink a Tequila Sunrise, anyone else?” Michael asks us.

“I’ll try one.” I raise my hand.

The sudden feel of a body pressing against mine turns my back stiff.

“Did it hurt?” The misty words uttered near my ear make me flinch.

“What?” I shift, forcing the body to move back slightly. There’s a tall, large, brawny guy in front of me. He’s wearing a very tight long-sleeve shirt, his blond hair is gelled back, and his black jeans leave almost nothing to the imagination.

“When you fell from heaven…did it hurt?” His fingers caress the end of my braid, forcing me to lean away against the counter behind me.

“Did you just confuse me with Lucifer?” I ask, not understanding his sudden question.

His eyes stop going up and down my body, lingering on my legs. I feel a little uncomfortable.

“Lucifer?” The guy’s expression has turned into a frown now. “No…I…”

“Ohhh, burn!” I hear Lori snort, but the guy’s attention is completely on me. He’s objectively handsome, but my body is rejecting his nearness.

“Never mind. I am here now. What are your other two wishes?” He gives me a toothy smile, leaving me puzzled once again.

“Crikey, you can’t stop being lame,” Lori clips just before he drags me close to him.

The beefy guy sends a hateful look Lori’s way.

“Find it hard to follow me? Yeah, my fiancés have the same problem at times.”

“Fiancés?” he asks.

“He has two,” Ollie explains, before gulping another shot.

“Wow! I can actually see the smoke coming out of his head,” Michael laughs at the guy.

“Fucking bitches!”

“If I wasn’t already married, this would have me erase Tinder from my phone,” Ollie teases.

“Fuck you, you crazy, ugly whores.” The guy’s face has turned red, he looks furious. Another very tall, very beefy man has made his way over, a friend of his I suppose.

“Were you suddenly hit with Tourette’s syndrome?” Lori asks him.

“No, Lor. He’s simply an incel.” Ollie smirks, giving the guy a long look.

“A what?” he growls angrily.

“An incel is a person, usually male, who has a horrible personality and treats people like sexual objects, thinking his lack of a sex life comes from being ‘unlucky’ when the cause is his blatant sexism and terrible attitude.”

“In other words, he is the entitled jerk who calls you an ‘ugly bitch’ right after you ignore or reject his brave, but gross attempt at an opening line,” Michael adds.

“Hard pass,” Lori finishes. “Plus this bitch,” he touches his chest, “is very crafty. I suggest you shut your arse and run along!”

“Fuck that! Let’s settle this outside, you freaks!” the blond guy snarls.

“Really? Didn’t you hear my crafty bitch warning?”

“We need to meet the others in thirty minutes, Al,” the tall friend reminds the blond guy of…a previous engagement.

“Look at them,” he counters with a snort. “I’ll need less than five minutes.”

“Less than five,” Lori echoes.

“What?” the friend utters with disdain dripping from his voice. He crosses his arms in a deliberate move that shows his huge biceps under the parka he’s wearing. “Are you scared, Tinker fucking Bell?”

He seems to be an incel as well.

Lori turns his gaze on him. I’ve seen that crazy look in his eyes every time he’s about to make someone eat their words. Oh boy.

“Let’s do it.” Ollie finishes his cocktail through the metal straw and then moves toward the back of the bar without looking back.

I open my mouth to try to stop him, but Michael's hand squeezing my shoulder halts the words in my throat. I'm not afraid for my friends, I know they can wipe the floor with these rude guys, I just don't want them to do it because of me.

"You need a distraction, right? Lori and Ollie need to vent a little. Birds, stone." Michael hands me a cocktail glass and then pulls me across the bar and outside into the smoking area. It looks like a veranda, delineated by physical partitions all around, two sliding windows, and a roof. Four tall ashtrays are standing at the four corners and little round lights decorate the walls. I can see a few cars in the alley outside and a couple of dumpsters under the lampposts illuminating the silent area.

The windows are closed, but the air is chilly in here. The two beefy men talk low for a few seconds. The friend seems eager to finish this.

I'm fidgeting from one foot to the other, moving close to Michael. It's cold, and I feel like I'm once again the cause of another mess. I did need a distraction but not of this kind.

"Do you want gel man or parka dude?" Lori asks Ollie, they look both at ease and excited about the upcoming fight. They love the adrenaline, the thrill that comes from subjugating an asshole—I'm quoting their words.

"Parka dude, I guess." As soon as Ollie finishes uttering those words, parka dude moves toward him. He's taller and with more muscle mass. The difference in size doesn't seem to intimidate Ollie—he used to be part of an illegal underground fight ring, That's how he met Rague. He also trains with him, who's triple parka dude's build.

Ollie evades two punches aimed at his face and a knee to his chest, before hitting the other man in the side and then kicking his knee, moving in the perfect position to trip him. As the big guy stumbles forward, Ollie spins and elbows him in the nape, and then lands a merciless, full kick to his back. I get out of the way as parka dude hits his forehead against one of the ashtrays and then falls heavily on the floor. Damn, he's tall. Less than a minute, and the first guy is already down.

My eyes move to Lori. Gel man has pulled him against his front, a knife is resting against Lori's throat. I let out a terrified gasp, but Lori smoothly lifts

both his hands to grab the large arm around his throat. He bites it viciously and then twists it outward, breaking the guy's hold on him.

"Bringing a knife to a fist fight, so naughty of you, gel man." He spins around and takes the knife out of the guy's fingers. Then he stabs it into his thick thigh. The blade slices through fabric and skin easily, making the man scream in pain as Lori gives it a slow twist, going deeper into the rectus femoris muscle. The attacker is growling and sweating when Lori steps back, pulling the knife out. He kicks him in the balls, making him stagger away holding both his thigh and groin now. His pant leg is turning crimson red like his cheeks as he drops to one knee, groaning. Lori throws the knife in the air and catches it by the blade, ready for the next attack.

"You should have listened to my suggestion, you daft prick," Lori scoffs. Then he abruptly brings down the knife's handle on the guy's temple and watches him fall unconscious to the hard floor.

"That's it? Those guys were pathetic," Lori whines. "I thought they'd have a little more stamina or at least a better pain threshold, for bloody sake."

Ollie is tapping his shoe on parka guy's side, but there's no response.

"It was entertaining," Michael assures him, drinking from his glass. I completely forgot about mine. My fingers feel frozen around it.

"This is all my fault," I mumble around the cocktail straw.

"Not true, Angel. Thanks to this, Bez won't be strangled tonight." Lori smiles at me.

"What did he do?" Michael asks.

"He said my face's beauty regimen is shit and threw all my creams in the trash!"

Oh, that's like declaring war to Lori, he's obsessed with his skin care routine.

"But what did you do to make him react like that?" Ollie turns our way.

"Nothing."

“The way you scoffed it out implies there’s definitely something,” Ollie insists.

“I might have kept him waiting for…a while.”

“How long is a while?” Michael tilts his head in question.

“One…Two hours—” Lori starts to say when I see movement out of the corner of my eye.

“Watch out!” I scream just as parka dude comes down on us. Ollie tries to stop the punch, but it finds his stomach. Lori hits the dude’s throat as I splash my drink on his face. Michael pulls one of his arms back as Lori does the same on the other side until I hear two cracks, probably from both shoulders being dislocated, and a loud groan. They let him go and face him again.

With a grunt Ollie moves in front of him, glaring he raises his fisted hand and lands a few hard hooks to the guy's solar plexus. I hear a pop, and then a shower of white powder hits me. All of us.

I start coughing as I inhale the substance, while parka guy falls on his knees and then face on the ground, forcing me and Michael to take a couple of steps back.

“What the fuck is this shit?” Lori is blowing out air while shaking his head to make the powder fall down from his curls.

“It’s…cocaine,” I tell him. “I could test it back at the lab, but I’m pretty sure.” I’ve helped my brothers get rid of more than one drug dealer. Studying drugs became a side hobby.

“No need. It’s coke.” Ollie's eyes widen. “Dick used to sell it.” His late father.

“Oh fuck!” Michael mutters, spitting on the ground. His jacket has cocaine all over the right shoulder.

Ollie crouches near the guy on the ground and lifts an almost empty plastic bag that was hanging halfway out of the parka’s large, open pocket. There is residual cocaine inside. Ollie must have broken the bag when he punched

the guy, forcing the drug out. Gravity and the dude's incredible height did the rest.

He starts slapping parka dude, but he doesn't wake up. I turn to the other guy on the ground, but he looks out of it, as well.

"What should we do?" Ollie asks, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Do you feel any discomfort?" Michael asks. "Shortness of breath, chest pain, itchy skin?"

We all shake our heads.

"No allergic reaction, then. That's good."

"Is it? We sniffed coke!" Lori barks.

"It was an accident," I remind him. "And we didn't inhale a large amount. We can go to the hospital if you want."

Lori snorts. "And tell them what? That we accidentally inhaled coke while beating a guy?"

"We just have to wait for it to leave our systems," Michael states. He goes to the windows and slides them open.

"You got some on your nose," I let him know.

"Hairy Fucking Fairy!" Lori exclaims, standing on top of gel man's back, who's still lying on the ground.

"Why are you using our safe-bestie protocol code word?" Ollie snarls at him, receiving a shrug back. He kicks the parka dude twice in the side before looking up and growling. I also look up. The roof is pretty high.

I feel the change overtaking me already. Euphoria along with an elevated heart rate.

"Damn. This is the year of the high for me." Lori chuckles. A couple of months ago, he was dosed, that's how he kind of ended up with Gabe.

"Not again," Ollie grumbles. "No. No. Don't want to trip again."

“Oh right, you were drugged too. Wait, no, you drugged yourself.” Michael frowns at him.

“Not on purpose.” Ollie suddenly snorts and slaps Michael’s shoulder, causing another cloud of cocaine to billow around us. I step back to avoid breathing it in.

“Fuck! I’ve seen this movie, and my character ends up dead on the way home.” Michael looks anxious. Exaggeratedly so.

“Don’t go home, then,” Ollie clips.

“Ah, Okay.”

“Stressed spelled backward is desserts,” Lori suddenly states.

And to that I say, “It’s called a semordnilap, a word that becomes a different word when read backward.”

“Yeah? Too many glasses means fat asses,” Ollie adds.

I giggle. “We are losing our brain-to-mouth filters.”

“When did Lori ever have one?” Ollie asks, smirking at his bestie’s lifted finger. He lifted the wrong one.

“You mean our brain-to-action filter.” Michael points at Lori still on top of the guy.

“I feel, wow! I feel great.” I don’t really know who says that.

“I’m going to see a man about a dog,” Lori abruptly utters, as he moves away from the sleeping dude.

“Pet shops are closed,” I tell him.

“Gonna go piss, Angel.” *With a dog?*

“Where?” Michael widens his arms, showing him the smoking area.

“I’ll find a bottle…a place,” he says over his shoulder as he walks back inside the bar.

That reminds me of the glass still in my hand. I'm so thirsty all of a sudden, but the glass is empty. My leg starts vibrating. I look down and frown at it. I pat my coat, and oh, my phone!

"Guys, I George Michaeled the shit out of Lori's clothes." Ollie is looking down at the white shorts and light blue puffer jacket he's wearing.

"You did!" I tell him even though I don't know who this George Michael is. A fashion designer?

"Sing the Go-Go song!" Michael tells him excitedly.

Just as Ollie starts making weird dancing moves, Lori comes back, stopping him.

He's munching on something. "I have an idea."

"I hate when you have ideas, I get nervous." Ollie sniffs, scratching his nose.

My nostrils are a bit itchy as well.

"Let's go dancing!" Lori jumps up and down. High energy and excitability, another short-term effect of the drug. "Give me the car keys."

Ollie hands them to him. "I must be really high to think of getting into a car with you."

"I'm hungry," Michael complains.

"Mmm. Here!" Lori tosses him a protein bar before going back to his own. "Let's have a nibble now and then go."

*They're both tearing into those bars like they are…candy.*

"Since I can't tear into a certain person…" Lori says.

Did he read my mind? I didn't know cocaine could be so strong. The high purity of it must be the cause of its intense effectiveness, and the fact that this is my first time and…what was I thinking about?

"Bez is a troglodyte jerk." I nod at Lori. "But then Gabe is a jerk too."

“They are jerks. I love them,” I say, my throat is really dry.

“You’re softhearted.” Michael doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

“No! I’m selfish and wicked.”

“Please. You are like a dew fairy, living on pure sunshine and rainbows,” Lori snaps back.

“My thoughts are not pure.” I huff.

“Enough of your humble bragging,” Ollie suddenly exclaims.

Lori wraps an arm around Ollie’s shoulders. “Oh! I bet you’re thinking about a certain brother.”

“Foster brother,” Michael corrects him.

“I mean now there’s two of him! Two Uris! Two possessive beasts to tame.”

“No. There’s one Uri and one Ezra, who could turn out to be very dangerous,” Ollie interjects.

“Who isn’t in this family?” Michael reminds us with a snort. “Thinking of dangerous hunks, I want Raph,” he whines.

Lori keeps going, ignoring everyone. “You could have double fun!”

I swallow. “Fun?”

“The sexual kind,” he whispers darkly.

I pull on my braid. “I’m not a sexy femme fatale, how can I make Uri look at me?”

“Angel, Uri is a simple creature with very simple needs. Torturing, eating, torturing, fucking, torturing and repeat…”

“What’s your point?” I ask a little irritated. My nose keeps itching.

“I’ve learned two things are important in life. One, the passage of time is a cruel mistress, give it the finger by moisturizing every day. Two, when you want something, go for it. Idle hands do the Devil’s work. Use those fingers of yours, Angel. Use the crap out of them!”

“You could play him like a banjo,” Ollie interjects.

I feel a wave of confidence enveloping me. “Yes. I can play him!” Why have I been hesitating? I can’t even remember. All excuses. I could have him easily. “No idle hands. Banjo playing!”

“Exactly! Just close your eyes and think how great it would be to kiss Uri… and Ezra.” Lori gestures toward my eyes. But I don’t close them yet.

“I don’t want Ezra.” I’ve never even met him, and I kind of…don’t want to. Maybe. I don’t know.

“Okay, so just Uri then.” Lori sounds disappointed by my monogamous desires.

I take a big breath and let my eyelids fall down. The memory of his wet lips on mine is still so vivid. What would have happened if I’d moved my tongue? I need to drink from his lips again. I want to suck his tongue clean off.

“My heart rabbited in my chest!” Lori’s loud voice jolts me back to reality. He has his eyes closed and a big smile on his face. “Hooo Angel, I thought Uri would be the devouring one, but you’re like a horny monkey!”

*Am I?*

“Kissing requires thirty-four facial muscles and one-hundred-twelve postural muscles,” is my dull reply.

“Bugger, that’s a lot of moving,” Lori remarks.

Michael’s hand falls on my shoulder. “Just ride him out like an earthquake, he’ll love it.”

The image of me on top of Uri makes me blush. I feel a tingling sensation in my stomach, and my butthole can’t stop clenching. Does cocaine also stimulate sexual desire?

“Is it hot? I feel hot,” Lori asks, taking off his jacket. I look at the snow on the roofs of the cars on the street. Increased body temperature is another effect caused by the drug.

I slide the coat off my shoulders and slowly hang it on my arm. I pat it like I would a cat. It feels so soft. Wasn't I holding a glass?

"Where the fuck is he?" Rague's deep growl booms suddenly through the air just before he appears, followed by Gabe.

"Oh joy, they are here." For once I get Lori's sarcasm.

"You called them! Or did I?" Michael seems confused.

"Now that I think about it…maybe I did." I can't remember. My brain feels floaty and bright.

"I didn't. I think," Ollie whispers.

"Our only option here is to fake a stroke…or have a real one," Lori suggests, forcing us into a circle.

"You start. Lie down and try not to die." Michael points at the ground.

"I don't want to lie next to those two!" Lori gestures to the two unconscious men.

"We can hear you. Your whispering is very loud," Gabe lets us know.

"What the fuck happened here?" Rague stops near Ollie and grabs his face. "Why are your pupils blown, kitty?"

"All their pupils are."

"We might have inhaled some cocaine," I say.

"Ahhh, stop with the Paddington hard stare," Lori grumbles at Gabe. "This wasn't me. Ollie did it!" He throws his bestie under the bus. That's rough.

"Hey! I just punched the guy after he landed one on me. I didn't know he was carrying coke in a crappy plastic bag! You antagonized him in the bar," Ollie states, pointing a finger at Lori.

"Which one hit you?" Rague snarls angrily. He looks barely in control. Ollie waves in parka dude's direction.

"Raph and Uri are coming." Gabe sends me a serious look.

“Yay! I miss my caveman. I feel lonely,” Michael moans, laying his head against mine.

Uri is coming? “I’m not high enough for this crap.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, a chorus of laughter resounds around us—*us* being the buzzed ones. My two brothers don’t seem to share the merriment.

“Let me recap,” Gabe starts, staring at his fiancé. “You had a fight with some lowly drug dealers and inhaled an indeterminate amount of cocaine.”

Rague lifts the broken cocaine bag from the floor and, after rubbing some on his pinky, he tastes it.

“It’s pure,” he states before grabbing the front of the man’s parka to pull him up and lay two hard punches on his already bruised face. Rague gets very upset when someone touches his husband.

“Inhaled *pure* cocaine and then butt-dialed me,” Gabe finishes, taking a picture of parka guy.

“Who did?” Lori asks.

“You did, Little Wasp,” Bez replies, grabbing Lori’s waist and pulling him against his body.

“We could hear you whining about your face creams, singing a Mariah Carey X-mas song, trying to think about the best petty revenge ever planned, and talking to someone about some protein bars,” Gabe explains.

“Oh! The vending machine, my full bladder found it. They taste delicious.” He takes a protein bar out of his pink bag and shows it to his fiancé before pulling his hand back. “Oi, I forgot that I’m mad at you. Yes, I’m very mad even if you are so bloody handsome.” Lori is molding Gabe’s face with his fingers like it’s playdough.

“We should take them to a doctor,” Rague says.

“Chill. We didn’t breathe in that much,” I retort.

“I sent the dealer’s photo to Rami. He keeps an eye on all the pushers around Chicago and should be able to tell us what kind of…” Gabe’s phone beeps, stopping his explanation as he looks at the screen. “The dealer’s

name is Jason Andrews. He sells white powder cocaine, the purest in the city, thank fuck."

"Yay! We just need to ride the high, then. We will be fiiiiine. Let's go dancing!" Michael exclaims. "Hey! Where's my glass?"

"Oh my God! That's exactly what I was thinking…before," I tell him.

"It's amazing. Like mind reading." Michael grabs my hands, lacing our fingers as we smile at each other. I hear a thud. Suddenly I feel so light and carefree. It's the best.

"Are you thinking we should go to a dance club right now?" he asks me.

"No," I reply. "But let's go!"

Gabe hauls Lori over his shoulder and slaps his butt.

"Or we could do that," Michael points at them.

"Hey, put me down! I'm the sass master, how dare you lay your hands on me," Lori complains.

"Take the snarky gremlin away." I smile impossibly wide as I hear Uri's smooth, deep voice. An earful of melted caramel just like his golden skin. My gut tightens with want as I see the predatory grace of his stride. I can't keep my eyes off him. His dreads are high in a ponytail, putting all the facial piercings on display. He's wearing black jeans, leather boots, and a large red sweater.

"I'll dip your balls in honey and stick you in an ant farm, Super Model!" Lori threatens him, but Uri doesn't even look his way.

He stops in front of me, his angry eyes stare me down and bruising fingers grab my chin. "Dilated pupils. Fuck!"

I cling to his stiff body and bury my face in his neck, inhaling his rich sandalwood scent. His chest vibrates against mine with every word he utters. "You weren't fucking joking."

"Like I would about something like this," Rague barks.

I nuzzle my nose against his neck, breathing hard as I feel his fingers threading through my hair at my nape. Delicious shivers go up and down my body, and I let out a low moan.

“Your husband is like a koala in heat,” I hear Raph say.

“Yours is asking for sexual gratification too fucking loud,” Rague retorts.

“No dancing, then?” I turn my head to look at Lori, still dangling from Gabe’s shoulder. He seems…comfortable, groping my brother’s butt.

“No. Pollo Loco is waiting at home,” Gabe tells him as he starts walking away. Is he talking about Lori’s pet hen, Wednesday?

“Right, we need to be off to Bedfordshire. Happy trails, bozos. We’re going to put some memories in our memory foam bed!” he screams as he disappears with Gabe inside the bar.

Ollie is wrapped around Rague like a monkey, while Michael is on Raph’s back piggy-back style. He’s whispering something into his husband’s ear.

“Keep begging me, babe. I’ll have you kneeling at my feet soon,” Raph answers back with a devilish smirk.

Their exchange makes my dick throb as I imagine myself kneeling at Uri’s feet.

I’m suddenly lifted off my feet. Uri’s forearms are under my butt and his body is plastered to mine. As he starts walking, my dick rubs against his hard abs with every step he takes, making me bite my lower lip until I feel blood on my tongue. It’s so good, my brain turns foggy as zaps of electricity hit my lower body.

I turn my head and lick his neck. His skin tastes amazing, sweet and delicious, so incredible.

“Dibs,” I declare. He stops walking for a moment, but then his steps resume.

I don’t hear nor see anything else, too taken by the pleasure I’m feeling, until Uri lowers me inside his car. The sudden distance between us turns my

skin to ice. But the fire inside me keeps burning, and I don’t want to keep it at bay this time.

He leans against the car, both arms on the roof, wide chest on display as I look up at him from the passenger seat. He’s so close, I feel his warm breath gliding across my skin, and *ohmygod if that didn’t put dirty thoughts into my head*. I’m still riding the coke high and don’t feel like coming down anytime soon.

“You okay? The effects of the drug will last a few more hours.” His intense stare makes me purr like a cat. Even though he seems annoyed with me, I want him to keep looking at me and then touch me and take me.

What did he ask me? The smell of him heightens inside the car’s cabin.

“Not answering your phone can have serious consequences, Sari.” His calm, controlled tone is hiding a commanding edge of a threat.

My lips part. I want to apologize and tell him I won’t do it again. But what if I like the idea of receiving those consequences? Of feeling them on my skin?

My hands tremble as I remember the saying about idle hands. Uri suddenly grabs my left one, pushing our palms together, our identical scars touching. The blood promise we all made to never turn our back on one another, no matter what. His touch feels scalding, and I flinch back.

He instantly tightens his grip but then lets go to close the car door. A moment later he’s sitting in the driver seat. He turns on the engine, but doesn’t start driving. I catch his eyes slowly sliding down my body, a glint of appreciation in their depths, or is it the drug talking? Not caring about reality or drug-induced make-believe, need swells inside me until I can’t contain it anymore.

“Can I suck your dick?” I ask in a voice hoarse with nerves. I see the words as they come out of my mouth, floating in a line in the air, until they fade like clouds in the wind near his beautiful face.

A few seconds silently pass by, with his dark, intense eyes fixed on me.

I shift until I’m sitting on my knees on the leather seat, facing him. “I’ve never done it, and I really, really want to do it…to you.”

His jaw ticks. “If you expect me to back off because you’re high, you’re mistaken.”

I don’t. I know who Uri is. He’ll protect me from anyone and anything, but that doesn’t mean he’s a good guy.

“I don’t want you to back off. I want you to use my mouth,” I confess boldly.

I lick my lips and glance down at his groin. My chest feels impossibly full, lava swirling down to my balls, making them prickle with anticipation.

“Fuck, how can I say no to that, Baby Blue?” His large hand moves down to his pants, stopping for a moment. When his fingers still don’t move, I look up. He’s searching my face, and he must find what he’s looking for because he finally undoes the buttons. The first *thunk* sound reveals some brown hair, lighter than I expected. No underwear; the sight makes my mouth fill with saliva. The second *thunk* almost makes me gasp and melt with anticipation. Then the third displays some smooth skin before he whips his dick out.

Holy. Shit.

My attention is laser-focused on it. I imagined he was big, but seeing it up close? Hard for me—which is a mind-fuck—long and thick, pink tip glistening wetly. But the best part is that his beautifully proportionated dick is completely pierced from root all the way to the tip.

He tsks. “Changing your mind?” The taunt goes over my head. I’m too awestruck by the view. I crawl toward him, the little mole on the crown of his dick is calling my name.

I dip down and lick it. The taste of him bursts inside my mouth. Salty, rich, and slick, so damn potent that it takes over all my senses. I lick the next bead of pre-cum that wells out, and the next. I’m tasting Uri, and it’s better than I’ve ever imagined. I could live on his flavor.

“Thirsty, aren’t we? Do you like it?” he hisses.

I nod, keeping my tongue on his crown. My dick is leaking inside my thong, throbbing with desire.

“Drink more, then. Suck on the tip, feed on it.” His voice has become deep and raspy. He’s turned on just like I am.

A deep eagerness simmers through me as I part my lips around his pierced crown, sucking it inside and then nibbling on the piercing with my teeth. He pulls on my braid, wrapping it around his wrist, while his other hand slides over my nape to grab my head. I feel his fingers tightening, sending a delicious sting all over my scalp, but soon the grip loosens.

“Open up now. Watch your teeth,” he instructs me.

“It’s not my first time,” I reassure him.

His body turns rigid, hand pulling my braid back as he glares at me. “All your firsts are supposed to be mine!”

*What?* My brain is too foggy to process his words.

He lets out a terrifying roar. “I’ll kill them. Breaking all their bones.” I can see the gory intention in his flaming eyes.

“Them?”

“All the motherfuckers who touched you.” The cocaine in my system is telling me to sit on his lap and impale myself on his cock. But the pain his fingers pulling on my hair is giving me feels too good. I want more. I need to provoke him more.

“You have no right to…”

He yanks my head even further, displaying my neck to him. I bite my lip to stifle the moan.

“Don’t fucking finish that sentence unless you want me to go on a murderous rampage, Sari.”

“Of dildos?” I did touch second base with Trent—or was it third base? But it’s better to not tell the overprotective sociopath that.

“What?”

“I practice with my dildo,” I clarify.

Seeing the possessiveness in Uri’s gaze at discovering my almost entire lack of experience, all I can feel is a bit of unfairness and delight.

A shudder spreads through me and before I can think, he thrusts his dick all the way to the back of my throat. I loosen my jaw so he can go as far as possible, almost choking me. I hope my lack of gag reflex will bring him such a pleasure, he’ll come back for more.

“Holyfuckinghell. Swallow around me. Mmm. You’re taking it so well, Baby Blue.”

I swallow again around his pierced crown before pulling his cock out, tugging on the piercing with my teeth. The metal feels so good under my tongue. I lick his length up and down before taking as much as possible all the way to the back of my throat again. His hands lace behind my head, arms quivering on my shoulders like he’s trying hard to control himself. But his wrists are pressing my head forward, gently at first, then more forcibly choking me on his long, hard cock. My eyes water uncontrollably as I try to pull air inside my lungs. *God it feels so good!*

“Fuuuck!” he growls like a wild animal. “Cry for me.”

His hips jerk back and forth against the seat as he starts fucking my mouth. His rhythm turns wild, his piercing bumping the back of my throat with every thrust. More pressure forms behind my eyes, tears keep falling down my cheeks, drool down my chin. The pain, the pleasure is so exquisite my eyes roll back inside my skull, and I’m not even touching myself.

“Even your tears are beautiful. Keep crying, I want to hear you sob,” he hisses with his cock still pumping in and out of my mouth.

I swallow, causing the muscles of my throat to constrict around his crown. His growl is music to my ears, and I do it again. Every scrape of his piercings and every groan of pleasure is fixing little by little all the broken parts inside me. Cocaine gave me the courage to leap, but what keeps me high is his smell, his touch, and the heated look in his eyes.

I release his dick with a pop as I take deep breaths.

“Am I servicing your cock well?” I ask him, just like the guy in the sexy video did. I know I’m probably a slobbery mess, but he’s gazing at me with pure passion. I swear I can see flames licking inside his eyes. Am I dreaming?

Instead of giving me an answer, he commands, “Suck on my fingers.” Just before forcing three in my mouth. “This lewd face belongs to me.” He growls as I suck hard on those long fingers. They taste good, but I prefer his cock. “Pull up that slutty skirt.”

I eagerly do as he says. I gasp and my dick almost explodes as I realize that the ripping sound I’m hearing is Uri tearing my stockings. Can he see my cream-colored lace thong now?

“Keep your ass out, just like that.”

His pumping cock replaces the digits in my mouth as the tip of two fingers slowly spear my hole. The pain of the stretch is very real. It fires up something inside me. So many different sensations all at once.

My balls draw up, everything turns white, and then ecstasy explodes out of my dick. I moan around his cock while more cum spurts out, wetting more lace.

Uri doesn’t stop fucking both my holes. “Are you coming with my dick in your mouth, Sari?” He lets out a low chuckle. “Good. Keep fucking your ass on my fingers.”

I realize with utter shock that I’m helping him drive in and out of my ass. I’m rocking back and forth, taking what feels like four fingers all the way inside. I let out a muffled cry, my mind hazy with need and lust. I’m drowning in Uri’s scent, Uri’s rough touch, Uri’s dirty words.

His dick seems to get even thicker and heavier in my mouth with every thrust.

“Don’t stick anything else in your hole from now on, or else,” he threatens. “If you shove anything other than my cock up your ass, I’ll punish you!”

Yes, yes. I want it. Whatever he gives me. I’m drunk on him and the pleasure he’s giving me.

A sudden smack resounds in the car. The pain radiates on the top of my butt, sending a glorious sensation from my brain to my hardening dick. Oh my God. My eyes cross, and I almost melt against the seat. Those long fingers rubbing the burning skin, I want them to hurt me again. I can't ask him, though, since his dick is still keeping my mouth full.

"Were you roaming around looking for cock tonight? Is that why you didn't reply to any of my calls or texts?" My glassy eyes find his angry ones just as his broad palm comes down on the other butt cheek, turning my entire body into an oversensitive bundle of nerves.

Another orgasm—stronger than the first one—makes me a shuddering mess. My knees almost give out as I grab for life on Uri's thigh.

"Fuck," he snarls, and thrusts harder, making my throat achingly raw. "Milk my cock dry."

He drives his fingers inside my ass and grinds and hooks them, touching a place inside me that incites one more striking spasm—my cock dribbles another small spurt of cum. The continuous waves of pleasure keep going.

He suddenly stiffens and pulses on my tongue, while I swallow desperately, trying to get every drop inside my stomach. The sound of his grunts and the sight of extreme pleasure on his upturned face leave me filled with immeasurable satisfaction.

He waits a little, then slowly dislodges his cock from my throat, dragging the pierced head over my tongue. He rubs it there a couple of times, seemingly hypnotized by the sight before pulling all the way out. A few drops of cum escape, and I lick my lips, trying to catch them all.

He grabs my braid again to pull me up and drop me against his chest. I gasp with surprise, but he's too busy untangling my hair. I bury my face in his dreads and just breathe him in. It almost feels like he has no intention of letting me go. His fingers run through the loose strands as he starts licking a warm, wet path up my throat.

My heart hammers, my breath catches, my entire, trembling being is solely focused on his smooth tongue slowly going over my skin.

“I want to fucking feast on your body until there’s nothing left but your taste in my mouth,” he whispers so seductively, my head falls back while my sated body attempts to come to life once again. His fingers grip my waist and a soul-affirming, exhilarating rush rips a long moan out of me.

I wish he’d bite me, that he’d leave a mark on my skin, proof for me to see that this really happened.

He suddenly dips his head, and I tilt my chin up to meet his mouth. One breath, my body coils, about to spring into action. I want it so badly that I ache for it. Then his lips are on mine, and a million nerve endings fray as everything gets hot. No matter how many times I’ve daydreamed about kissing Uri, the reality far surpasses the fantasy.

His mouth takes control of mine the same way he has taken control of my body. I feel like he’s going to eat me up, open me and taste me. I’m lying here, bare for him to use however he wants. The feel of his cold tongue piercing rubbing around my mouth makes me shiver with desire, and I plaster my chest against his, rubbing my nipples over his pecks, needing more friction, more closeness. Why are we still wearing clothes?

Is it possible for a moment to last forever? Because if there’s any moment I want to continue to infinity, it’s this one, with him surrounding me. One kiss, and I feel like my body and soul are his.

But how did he get this good at kissing? The bitter emotion is back, and I bite his lip and pull on his piercing in retaliation. He pulls back, licking the small drop of blood forming on his lower lip with a smirk.

“Stick out your tongue,” he orders me; I like how his voice deepens when he gets horny. It makes my stomach quiver.

He grabs my tongue with his fingers, stroking it between his knuckles before letting it go to suck deeply and hungrily on it.

I tear my mouth away, breathing hard. My eyes are drowning in his incredible light ones flaring with intensity. Is this really, really happening?

“I forbid you to go to clubs and bars unless I’m with you.”

“Why?” I ask; hope glimmers inside me.

“Because trouble finds you when I’m not.” Once again, his overprotectiveness kills my stupid expectations.

“God, Uri!” I push against his chest, moving back to my seat. “So, what the hell was this?” The deep annoyance I’m feeling bursts out of me. “Your way to keep me happy? To protect me, and from what? You know what would really do that? Letting me go free!”

“Let. You. Go?” he growls the words menacingly.

If I wasn’t high as a kite, I might’ve been able to tell Uri why, but I can’t draw my thoughts together enough to figure it out.

What comes out is: “There are times I wish you’d turn your gaze away.”

I hear a cracking sound, but when I look up, I only see Uri’s hands holding the wheel.

“Never. After tonight you never leave my sight,” he hisses.

He always says things that open my heart and break it while still beating inside my chest.

The silence turns heavy as I feel tears welling in my eyes.

“Put your seatbelt on,” he orders abruptly.

I suddenly feel like my stomach is hosting…a scurry of chipmunks dancing the rumba—like Lori would say.

When I don’t oblige, he does it for me gently, calmly. I hate it—how controlled he can be while I’m feeling sick. The dancing rodents want to get out. Oh, oh, they are getting out.

“I think I’m going to throw up,” I warn him, pushing on the window button, willing it to slide down faster.

“Hold it in,” he says, unimpressed.

I make a very noncommittal sound before uttering, “Too late.”

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# *six*

SARIEL

At first, it feels like I'm dreaming. Everything is fuzzy around the edges. A door opens and closes quietly. Then the mattress dips under someone's weight before he spoons me. I exhale, feeling all languid and sleepy. Despite my sore throat and sense of anguish, the tension melts away as soon as Uri's familiar scent envelops me. The weight of the arm around me isn't as familiar as it used to be when we were kids, but it soothes me the same, and I fall into darkness.

When I open my eyes, pain hits me hard like a knife slicing my frontal lobe. The blazing sun sends another stabbing pain straight through my eye sockets. I throw an arm over my face as my stomach rolls. My throat hurts and my mouth feels dry.

Oh God, where am I? I push myself up on my elbows first, letting my heavy head adjust, then I sit. I'm in a place that I don't know that well, but somehow recognize. Uri's bedroom. I'm wearing one of his long-sleeve cotton shirts—it smells like him—and underneath, my blue panties. I was wearing the cream pair yesterday, wasn't I?

There're two pills and a glass of water on the nightstand with a note: *To help with your headache.*

It's Uri's handwriting. I swallow them down and then walk unsteadily to the ensuite bathroom. As the cold water from the basin hits my face, memories

from last night come back to me in 4K resolution. Going to the bar with the guys, the two beefy men, the fight, the cocaine shower.

Oh crap, I inhaled cocaine! But what happened after that? Did I embarrass myself? Did I do something stupid? Was Uri there? Everything feels nebulous. The images are confused. My head is still hurting fiercely.

My eyes find my reflection in the mirror. I look pale. My long hair is loose on my shoulders, the corners of my mouth sting for some weird reason, and I have a small purple bruise on my neck.

My hand shakes as I hit the tap shut. Maybe one of the guys can tell me what the heck happened last night. While braiding my hair, I walk back to the bedroom to look for my phone. It's on the dresser.

I look at the time on the screen. Nine-thirty. I should be at work. There are no missed calls from the office, from Sandy. Raph probably let him know what happened last night.

I try calling Michael.

"Sari," he answers in a groggy voice after a couple of rings.

"Did I wake you?"

"No. It's been an hour since I got up, but I'm still trying to get my brain going." I know what he means. My head still feels foggy.

I start descending the stairs. "Last night was…"

"Fucking crazy!" Michael *almost* steals the words out of my mouth.

"My memories are fuzzy."

"I think you and Ollie breathed a larger quantity because of your position. Even though Lori acted really out of his mind."

He's sort of crazy on a normal day. Cocaine must have taken him to another level of madness.

"What happened after we inhaled the drug?" I ask him. I feel the incessant urge to know.

“Mine are not very clear as well, but I remember a very weird conversation, then jumping on Raph’s back and then Uri lifting you, and you humping him…”

My broken brain freezes in front of Albert E.’s room for a moment before re-starting again too fast. “I’m sorry, wh-what? I did what?” I force down the rock inside my throat. I must have misheard him. “I humped Uri?”

“More like rubbed your dick all over his belly,” Raph deadpans, painting a vivid, horrifying picture with such a careless tone.

“You had an idiotic smile on your face.” He keeps digging my grave.

“Not idiotic, Raph! It was…sweet,” Michael tries to make me feel better, but it does the opposite. I wonder what the non-pathetic, non-deeply embarrassed people are doing today.

A memory of Uri’s dreads gleaming under the bar lights hits me, or were his hazel eyes that shiny?

“You even tried to ruffle his dreads,” Michael adds. “See? Sweet.”

“I did?” *Oh, yes. I did.*

“And then—”

“There’s more?” I cut Raph off; apprehension leaks from my voice.

“No,” Michael replies. “I mean Uri was pretty pissed, but then you took off together all cozy…”

His words suddenly slow as my brain is bombarded by images of Uri and me in his car—X-rated images. The memories are confused and blurry and so…hot. Did I really do all that? Said all of that to Uri? Or did the drug bring one of my dirty fantasies to life? It felt so real, though. I perfectly remember his taste, the sound of his excited grunts, his fingers pumping inside me, the commanding way he drove his pierced dick down my throat.

My hole clenches, and I feel a slight sting. I swallow hard, sensing the soreness in my throat, the corners of my mouth are burning. It was real. Uri and I…

“So did something happen afterward?” Michael’s question halts my shocking train of thought.

“Can I call you back? I have the worst headache.” My voice trembles.

“Of course. Tell Uri to give you a lot of water and rest as much as you need.” The doctor in Michael quickly comes out.

After a hurried thanks, I hang up. I push Albert E.’s room door open. He’s sleeping on a fluffy bed near the big wheel, looking all cute and snuggly. Skinny pigs are usually not liked for their looks, but Albert E.’s smooth skin, the wrinkling around his legs and neck, and that fuzzy white hair on his little nose is what stole my heart the first time I saw him. He’s also very docile and social, and enjoys being with me; he even falls asleep on my lap when I work. I think of him more like a tiny dog than a guinea pig.

I check the water fountain and the level of food. Uri must have taken care of both before he left. Because he left, right? A sense of anxiousness overwhelms me. He could be in the pool or in the gun room. Can I face him after what I’ve done? I practically pounced on him. Begged to…pleasure him. But dear God that spanking felt so good.

It was the confirmation I needed. Feeling pain really turns me on. But I wonder how much further can I take it? A short laugh leaves my lips. It’s filled with relief and dread. I’ve tried so hard to push down this part of me, but I can’t simply flip a switch and be somebody else. I really am as fucked up as my brothers, maybe even more. Because, holy hell, I’ve never felt more alive than when Uri was choking me on his big dick. Those few spanks, though, weren’t remotely enough. I need more.

There’s still the possibility that the extreme ecstasy I sensed might have been caused by the cocaine. It increased the dopamine in my body, enhancing my sexual arousal and gratification. But it was Uri. Uri! Even without drugs, I’m sure the pleasure would’ve been out of this world. My body feels all tingly and ready for another round.

I bite my lower lip; the movement makes my mouth ache. My head feels slightly better as I make my way to the kitchen, but my whirling thoughts are not helping with the recovery.

No trace of Uri. In the fridge, there's an aloe shake. A note on top reads: *To help with the sore throat. Wait for me…or else.*

I let out a trembling breath. Desire explodes inside my belly as I read the promise of punishment in the note. That *or else* at the end sends a shiver down my spine. My legs turn to jelly for a moment, and I shoot my arm out to avoid hitting the fridge frame.

A moan resounds in the kitchen—it takes me a couple of seconds to realize it came from me. There's an urge inside me to defy his order. To provoke him into doing his worst.

The question is: would he give it to me?

I suddenly frown as another memory hits me. Did I puke in Uri's car?

An hour later, I'm at Bear-Stone Labs.

From the record player, I can hear Chris Stapleton singing about love and whiskey—country music usually helps me concentrate. Not today. I've been thinking about what happened yesterday on repeat. Not seeing Uri this morning has only made me hungrier for him. I sent him a text when I left the lake house in a hurry. I didn't come alone, Phoenix is still out there and even though I didn't hear from them since I moved, my stalker might be lurking, as well. That's why I called the car company Gabe uses for Lori to stop him from driving.

Uri's reply was promising. I've been vibrating with excitement since I saw his text.

URI

I'm on my way. DON'T FUCKING MOVE!

When I arrived at work and met Raph in the lobby, he told me Uri was at the car wash. So emptying my entire stomach on his dash and car door

followed by my loss of consciousness wasn’t a drug-induced nightmare.

I’ll never accidentally inhale any kind of drug ever again in my life.

I hear the sliding door opening and then Sandy’s voice. “I’ve gathered all the mail on your table and scheduled your appointments for next week. There were some journalists camped outside, but I dispersed them. Anything else you need? Your usual tea?” he asks.

“Yes, please.” I raise my head to look at him. His hair is green now, and he’s wearing a pink suit with a cute bow around his neck. “You’re so good to me. I know I need a new assistant, but I barely have time these days.” Sandy is technically Raph’s PA, not mine. But after Clark left, he’s temporarily taken the position.

“Don’t worry. I contacted the HR department; they already gave me a list of promising candidates. The interviews will start in an hour. Do you want me to take care of it?”

“I trust your judgment. I’ll tell Raph to raise your salary.”

“He already pays me generously, but I can’t say no to that.”

“I’ll miss you, you know?” I tell him before he leaves the room.

“No, you won’t because I’ll find you a mind-fucking-blowing new PA!”

A few minutes later somebody else comes in. One of the interns judging by her blue coat.

“That’s a nice, boot-licking secretary,” she unprofessionally utters.

The way she’s looking at me is filled with interest. All the interns here seem to want to chat about my research. I push my glasses up my nose and focus on the study again. She works on another research floor, and although I let interns come into my lab from time to time, she shouldn’t be here right now.

“The test results are in,” she says, dropping a file on my desk.

“Oh, I already got them.” The numbers aren’t matching up like they should, and that’s reigniting my headache.

**“**Do you need something else?” she suddenly murmurs from behind me.

What I need is Michael since he’s a pathologist specializing in hematology. He’s provided essential insight and information. But I know he’s indisposed because of last night.

“No, thank you,” I reply without looking up—my eyes glued to the microscope.

“What are you doing? Can I help?” She leans forward, brushing against my back to see what I’m reviewing, unnecessarily crowding me.

“No. I need a hematologist.” I keep my voice flat, ready to push her away if she doesn’t back off this instant.

Her hand lands on the microscope near mine, her thumb touches my skin for a moment. I straighten abruptly. That fleeting contact made me uneasy.

She looks remorseful, an apologetic smile twitching her lips as I shift and turn her way. “Blood never lies, right?”

I frown at her.

“Haven’t you ever seen Dexter? The TV show,” she adds. She doesn’t move, but I still feel uncomfortable. This stalker ordeal is turning me into a jumpy monkey.

“No,” I reply.

My eyes fall to the name on her coat: Maggie Smith.

“I’m sorry to have disturbed you, but I’ve been wanting to ask something for a while. Would you—”

Sandy’s return stops whatever Maggie was about to say. His eyes flicker from the intern to me. He can probably see how tense I am.

“You. Out.” He tilts his head to the door while his eyes stay on the intern.

Maggie doesn’t move. The smile has dropped from her lips. Her teasing gaze has turned into a glare aimed at Sandy.

“You shouldn’t be here. Dr. Bear-Stone’s lab is inaccessible to interns,” Sandy continues, moving closer to us.

“Sorry.” The intern suddenly looks embarrassed. “I just brought the test results, that’s all.”

“It’s not your job,” the PA insists, holding up the mug filled with my hot tea. He moves between us and hands it to me.

Maggie finally takes a step back. “Dr. Crisp told me to bring them here.”

“I’ll definitely verify that. Now go back to the other interns.”

She sends me a small smile before finally leaving the room.

Sandy quickly starts tapping on his phone. “Oh, those groupies of yours. Don’t worry, you’ll never see her again after I tell Raph.”

“She didn’t do anything. I’m just edgy.”

“I can see that,” Sandy agrees, still typing on his phone. “But better let your brother work his magic. You never know.” What he means is let him fire the intern, not kill her. Sandy doesn’t know about the family side business. He's an amazing assistant and an incredible person; he can’t be mixed up with that dangerous part of our lives.

“You really don’t need to involve Raph. That intern was just curious about my study.” I’m about to take a sip from my mug when the sight of a red package on the desk near the window stops me. Where did that come from? Is it the dildo I ordered? That was fast.

Sandy is talking on the phone with the HR department as I grab the box cutter and go to the desk to slice the tape before opening the cardboard flaps. As soon as I look inside, I know I’ve made a mistake. A pair of metal cuffs and a picture of me with my eyes burned out are on a bed of black rose petals. There’s also a torn piece of paper that says: *You can’t run from me anymore*.

“Sari, what’s wrong?” Sandy’s voice sounds far away, even though he’s next to me. He looks down at the package and curses loudly. “Don’t touch anything. Don’t even look at it. Sari?”

His voice sounds muffled now as the thoughts in my head keep piling up. Why now? Why me? What should I do? What do they want from me? Who

are they? Do I know them? Why? How?

I can’t breathe. I’m hyperventilating. My palms are sweating profusely. I’m…I’m having a panic attack.

I need to…cup my hands and…breathe into them slowly. I look at them, but I can’t feel my fingers or my toes. Everything is blurry. I can’t see. There’s not enough air. *Not enough air*. I have no control over my body. I feel like I’m slowly dying. This is the end. *I can’t-can’t breathe*.

“Baby Blue. I’m here.” His gravelly, soothing voice suddenly makes its way inside my scattered brain. Uri.

*I need you, Uri,* I want to say, but my lips don’t move. My body is not listening.

I feel my lips being forced apart and then air being blown into my mouth, forced into my lungs.

“Take it. Just like this. You’re doing great,” he keeps whispering encouragement between exchanges of air.

I eagerly accept the breath of life he’s offering me as he places his mouth tightly on top of mine over and over again to inflate my lungs. Until I finally breathe again by myself.

I don’t know how much time has passed, but I am starting to see things clearly now. Uri is making soft, shushing sounds right next to my ear as I find myself on his lap, on the couch in Raph’s office. I’m shaking. I can’t seem to stop. My lips are parted around fast, short breaths.

“U-Uri?” I can finally utter.

His warm hand cups my cheek as he shifts us slightly to let our eyes meet.

“I’m here. I won’t let you go, Baby Blue.”

His soft murmurs, familiar scent, and steely arm wrapped tightly around my waist are the only things anchoring me to reality. Like he is all that is holding me together right now.

“Breathe out slowly.” His commanding eyes hold my gaze intently as I do as he says. “Now inhale.”

He grabs my trembling hand and holds it firmly in his, our scars pressing against each other. “Now again. Out. In.”

I blink a few times, tears are welling as my heart fills with gratitude and love, so much love it could explode. I want to thank him for being here for me when I needed. I want to do the same for him. I want Uri closer. I want, I want, I want him.

“If with my life or death I can protect you, I will.” I hear him say, his warm lips brushing my ear.

I move back to look at his resolute expression. Some dreads have fallen out of his bun, and with a still shaky hand, I tuck one behind his ear. He lets out a long sigh before his forehead falls on mine. Our lips are almost touching when I hear Raph’s menacing voice.

“So we know how the package got inside my building. But what I want is that guard here in my office, on his fucking knees!”

I turn to look at him. He’s on the phone. Michael is next to him, worried eyes watching me.

“I checked with HR; his shift ended thirty minutes ago. Alright, let me know when you have him.” He hangs up and addresses Uri, “Hunter is going to pick up and bring to the base the guard who was bribed to bring in the package—Rami found out a large deposit was made on the guard’s account. Hopefully we’ll get some answers. Rami is on his way here.”

“You need to up your surveillance and check every person who comes in and out of the building.” Uri sounds like he’s barely controlling himself.

“Already on it,” Raph replies between gritted teeth.

“How do you feel, Sari? I have some water for you,” Michael says, taking a step toward me with the bottle in hand. Uri tightens his hold, pulling me harder against his chest as Michael stops a couple of feet away from us.

“I feel better already.” I try to give him a smile, and I seem to be successful since Michael nods at me. He doesn’t come any closer but stretches his arm as much as he can to hand me the water. Uri doesn’t loosen his grip on me, which makes the whole bottle exchange slightly difficult. But after a couple of tries, I get it.

“Nobody will touch you, Sari. We won’t let them.” Raph makes the compelling statement. He isn’t looking at me but at a growling Uri, like he’s talking more to him than me.

I’m still shaken up and scared to my bones. But I know I’m not alone. I have my whole family behind me. In front of me. All around me.

Hours later, I’m at the lake house. Uri carried me out of the office, holding me in his arms as he waltzed me out of the building. For once, I didn’t mind his manhandling and overprotective ways. I thought this stalker was just a pervert with a harmless fixation and that my lab was a safe place. But I was wrong on both counts. The idea of having someone this twisted able to get inside a private area of my life is really frightening.

Rami and Michael took care of the package. Like before, there were no prints. The picture with my eyes burned out was printed from my public profile on the Bear-Stone Labs website and the metal cuffs are a cheap magician prop sold by different websites and shops around Chicago. The note was written with the same old typewriter again.

I was counting on getting some answers from the guard who brought the package inside the building, but the police found him in the bathroom of a diner a couple of blocks away from work. It looked like he’d had a heart attack. Perhaps too much of a coincidence. Rami redirected the corpse to a hospital where the medical examiner owes Gabe a favor; they will perform a thorough autopsy on the corpse—under Michael’s watchful eyes—and keep us posted.

If our suspicions are right, my stalker just escalated to murder. The thought sends a chill down my spine. Uri's lips instantly land on my head, warm and comforting, as his arm wraps more tightly around my shoulder, his gaze still locked on the television.

The driver I used this morning brought us back here. Uri spent the ride back home on the phone while I dozed on-again-off-again. After a long shower, Uri suggested we watch a movie since I wasn't hungry, too rattled by everything. No panic attack for years, and now twice in a week.

He took a seat right next to me on the couch without leaving any space between us, cramming me between him and the armrest. His weight is enough to dip the cushions, making me slide into his hip. We are pressed together just enough to be a form of torture. His masculine scent and the warmth of his body make me constantly glance his way.

Uri doesn't seem to want to have a repeat of last night. He's acting a bit more handsy than usual, but that's just because he remembers I need physical closeness after a panic attack. Every time he's near me, it is as if time slows down and tranquility reigns around me.

I look down at my lap. Albert E. is sleeping on the blanket covering my legs. The familiar sight of him napping so soundly gives me a little comfort. He sleeps a lot. I caress his smooth back, lingering on the tuft of hair on his head. His short, right leg starts kicking the air—it's his way of letting me know he enjoys it since he has no tail to wiggle. It makes me smile affectionately at him.

Uri's low growl makes me raise my head.

"Why are you glaring at Albert E.?" I ask, catching the angry look pointed at my guinea pig.

"He has his room to sleep in." There's a weird inflection to his words, a dark one.

"My lap is very comfortable too," I retort, piqued by his annoyed tone.

"I know." The corner of his mouth curls up, lifting the hoop around his lip. I suddenly remember pulling on it with my teeth.

His hand moves into my loose hair. I forgot to braid it after the shower, and his fingers start a toe-curling massage over my nape that makes me forget about everything but the soothing sensation.

“You always give me what I need,” I suddenly feel the urge to say to him. Because it’s true, even though he’ll never give me what I need the most: his heart.

“I always will.” The rumble of his voice gives me delicious goosebumps.

What if I ask him to kiss me right now? Would he? I don’t open my eyes, too afraid he’ll read my desire in them. Too afraid he’ll reject me…or oblige me.

“Always?”

His reply comes quickly. “Till the end of me.”

“Or me.”

“No,” he rumbles. “I’d never let you go first.” The confidence in his voice almost makes me believe he has any say in it.

His hand leaves my hair and grazes mine, it brings fire licking up my limb. Then he moves away. The empty space he left feels inhumanly cold.

He turns off the television and grabs Albert E. from my lap. “You sleepy?”

“No,” I tell him, noticing how delicately he’s holding my pet.

“Come.” He turns and moves to the door.

I leave the blanket on the couch and follow him. I’m wearing only an oversized white sweater that reaches my thighs. Underneath I have a simple cotton bra and panty set—it’s the comfy pair of lingerie I wear when I feel off.

Uri leaves Albert E. in his room before taking me by the hand and moving down the corridor. His fingers feel so warm and reassuring around mine as he keeps walking with confident steps. He stops in front of the metal door to go through the security checks. I know it will open to the shooting range. I’ve never been inside, but Uri told me about it.

A small beep, and then he pushes the door open. The room is bigger than I expected. The targets lined up on the distant wall on the right have pictures of people on them. They must be Uri's future donors.

He's taking something from one of the drawers on the opposite wall. I move closer; it's filled with guns.

"I haven't practiced in months." I hear myself say, dragging my gaze away from Uri's tanned throat; his dreads are in a bun again, putting all that smooth skin on display.

"Six months," he remembers since the last time was with him. "Here." He hands me a beautiful gun, small, light, with a white pearl handle.

"A Walther PPK, James Bond's gun."

I smile. I know he enjoys watching OO7 movies—anything detective-ish. "Her name?"

"Honey Ryder," he replies, guiding me toward the firing stand. There's a pair of earmuffs on the counter, but I don't wear them. I'm used to the loud noise. It's kind of comforting even. Such a strange thing to be reassuring.

"What's the first rule about new weapons?"

"Never trust one you've never tested or fired," I recite one of Linda's teachings.

"Very good. Give it a try."

I take the safety off and point the gun in front of me—it feels cold in my hand. There's no picture on the target down the lane, just one word written in red: *Stalker*.

My hand suddenly trembles, my sight turns blurry as I remember my photo with burned eyes. My finger slips on the sensitive trigger as the loud *bang* resounds in the room. The bullet misses, and I take deep breaths in as I try to compose myself. I guess I'm still shaken. "Maybe handling guns is not a very good idea right now."

Uri is suddenly behind me. His cotton shirt-clad chest brushes against my back, his calm voice near my ear. "Give Honey a good grip; hug it with

your thumb.” His fingers move over mine, shifting my hand position. “Treat her with precision and tact,” he says, barely above a whisper. “Remember, always shoot to kill. In the middle of the forehead or straight to the heart.”

My heart beats so loud, I squirm a little. All thoughts of the stalker magically and swiftly disappear. I can feel the round shape of Uri’s hard nipples through the thin fabric of his shirt. It’s distracting. I’m idly wondering what they would feel like on my bare skin without the fabric in the way when Uri’s hands land on my waist, making me jolt a little.

He doesn’t seem to mind my reaction. “Remember the key to shooting is controlling your breathing…”

“Breathing will keep my heart still,” I finish.

I close my eyes and empty my mind. No past, no present, no future. When I open them, I shift the gun and fire my shot. It hits the heart.

A smile jumps immediately to my face. Uri hums with satisfaction, the sound vibrating against my back as we’re pressed so close together. My stomach somersaults at the sound.

I suddenly feel a bulge against my ass, and as I fire more bullets, the bulge grows. Is he turned on by my shooting?

“Fuck yeah!” he growls right into my ear. “Keep going.”

The more I shoot, the more precise my aim gets until I get the target’s bullseye. The gun is still in my grip as my hands fall forward on the counter. Uri is grinding his hard cock against the curve of my butt, lifting my sweater over my waist and pressing me against the hard surface of the firing stand.

“You need to stop rubbing against me like that if you don’t want me to fucking devour you,” he hisses. I realize he’s right. I’m the one stroking his cock between my ass cheeks now. Was I also the one starting this?

The acknowledgement doesn’t stop me. I keep working him until I feel his piercing stroking against my clenching hole. A zip of electricity rushes down, turning my dick rigid. My eyes become hooded, lips slightly parted. It’s too late for me now. I opened this Pandora’s box, and I can’t go back.

“Mhm,” Uri lets out a deep hum before he grabs my face and tilts it up, robbing my breath. His fingers dig into my jaw so that he can feed me his wet, pierced tongue, as he kisses me upside down. Our hips don’t stop moving, humping each other like two animals in heat. My cock is sliding against the counter with every movement.

I give back as ferociously as he’s taking. He bites me and then laps at the indent he made with his tongue; it feels like a fist of warmth hitting right into my chest. His hand covers mine once again, and lifting the gun up, his finger pushes mine on the trigger. The two shots booming in the room, don’t halt my lust. My desire has reached the skylights, a gun firing close to me, even though dangerous, can’t stop this. Nothing can.

I’m trapped in a pleasure haze while he’s eating the fuck out of my mouth. I’m melting against him, my legs are giving out, but I still meet him, passionate stroke for passionate stroke.

“There’s nothing sexier in my world than you holding a gun,” he rasps against my trembling lips.

His hands slide down my sides until they find bare skin. They grip my hips, making me gasp. Fingers glide under my panties, taking two handfuls of ass cheeks bruisingly hard. The pain hits me inside where it feels so good, and I let my head fall back on his shoulder. The loud growls that leave his lips cover the sound of my slutty moan as he drives his leaking dick against my wet panties.

“Keep hold of the gun.” I barely process his command when I’m suddenly spun around and lifted up—one hand holding my ass. My legs are hooked around his waist as my back hits the pole that divides each firing stand.

“Take off your sweater,” he orders. I do so as he unbuttons his jeans with deft fingers, taking out his dick before releasing mine from my panties. He opens his mouth and lets saliva drip on them before wrapping a large hand around both shafts and starting to jerk them off. My hands fall on his shoulders, the one not holding the gun grips the skin, nails digging in. My eyes are fixed on our dripping cocks moving against each other. His is longer and thicker than mine; his piercings keep stroking my sensitive skin, sending bolts of undiluted ecstasy all over my body.

“Uri. Yes!” I scream as I start moving my hips to get more friction.

He pins me more firmly against the pole as the rhythm of his hand increases. My back hurts, enhancing the pleasure and making me crave more.

A gasp falls from me when I find Uri watching me with depraved intensity, teeth gritted. The mole on his cheek trembling. “Suck on your fingers.”

I follow his growled command without hesitation, pushing three inside my mouth and sucking them like I would his cock.

“Fuuuck!” His nostrils flare as his strokes slow down. “Fuck yourself. Let me look at your lewd face while your fingers are plunging in and out of your hole.”

Holy shit. This is too good; I feel like I’m going to pass out from too much pleasure. The sound of a hard slap makes me find his glaring eyes again. The burn comes after, focusing on the side of my hip. I hiss as my dick twitches, ready to come.

I move my slick fingers down. His hand gripping my butt pulls the panty fabric away, keeping one cheek spread to give my fingers easier access.

“Only the tip first, in and out of that pink pucker. Feel it opening you, slowly,” Uri whispers sultrily, making my eyes cross as I do what he wants. His other hand is giving our dicks slow, firm pumps now, which are not enough.

My mouth goes wide as the first finger suddenly slides in. It stings without lube. I can feel every little twinge and pang. It’s titillatingly erotic.

“You got it all in,” he says provocatively. “Stretch that hole, play with it, make it loose for the next finger.” He spits on our cocks again. His hand is beating us off a little faster.

“One more,” I gasp as I add another inside. I never knew I could turn into such a wanton person. It’s so freeing to embrace who I am. So right.

“Keep going, Baby Blue, let me hear how much you like it.”

The third finger glides near the others as I pump them in and out. A moan echoes in the room, or maybe I keep crying all my pleasure. I don't know anymore. I'm feeling too much. My senses are in overdrive, and yet I want more.

The gun. I'm still holding it in my hand. I unhook my arm from behind his neck and bring it over my chest. I let the cold muzzle touch my nipple through the thin cotton bra. The bud stiffens, and a whimper leaves my mouth as I press the metal more firmly over it. Uri's surprised grunt makes me look at him as I shiver with delight. The consuming desire in his eyes encourages me further. I trail the pistol over my neck, my chin, my cheek, feeling the air leaving my mouth in panted breaths. I stop only when I reach my parted lips.

His hand halts as well and his grip loosens around our shafts, making me almost scream in desperation. My body stiffens when suddenly I feel one of his fingers piercing my hole. It slides next to mine, bigger, longer, thicker, impossibly and painfully stretching me. It's not a gentle discomfort. It burns me from the inside and turns me into a sex fiend. My shaking legs tighten around his waist as my hips start impaling my hole on our combined four fingers.

"Lick it. Fucking lick Honey Ryder." His voice sounds thunderous, I've never heard this tone from him. Demanding and menacing, promising sweet hell if I don't comply. It excites me. I push my tongue out between my lips, and keeping my gaze fixed on his, I give the metal barrel a long, slow, sensual lick.

The growl ripping out of his chest is the sexiest sound I've ever heard.

"Say my name again," he hisses, but I can hardly breathe. His hand is beating us off at a frantic tempo. He's working me on both sides, finger fucking me roughly and mercilessly. I'm utterly lost to him.

He shoves my back even harder against the pole, his hips pinning me in place as he goes at me like a man desperate for more. I can feel the way our pre-cum helps our dicks move smoothly on every erotic slide, and it feels so incredibly amazing that I don't want it to end. But there's no way I can hold myself back with Uri.

He suddenly grabs my balls and squeezes so hard I cry as stars appear in front of my eyes. I feel heavy tears falling down my cheeks as I'm engulfed by immeasurable pleasure. It bursts out of me, making my body arch. The first spurt hits my chest as I shiver, overtaken by bliss. I scream his name over and over, until my throat hurts.

When I come back to earth, I feel cum sliding down my chest and belly. I'm light, body buzzing. I open my eyes, letting more tears roll down. When my sight clears, what I see on Uri's face is not satisfaction. His expression is dark, jaw tense, completely closed off.

Without looking at me, he lets me down slowly and cautiously, and places Honey Ryder on the counter. I suddenly feel cold. I wrap my arms around my chest, but it's no use, because I soon realize the chill is coming from inside me.

When I look down at Uri's still open pants, I notice he's still hard. He didn't come.

"Didn't you like it?" What a stupid question. He kissed me, touched me with such passion, and he's hard, of course he liked it.

"Do you want my mouth again?" I ask hesitantly.

Why isn't he answering me? He's just staring at one of the targets, looking tense. His fist flexing, jaw ticking. Dick leaking pre-cum.

I reach my hand out with the intention of jerking him off, but he grabs my wrist before I make contact. His grip is too tight, just shy of painful. I shudder at the delicious sensation, and he abruptly releases me and starts buttoning up his jeans.

"Don't you want to?" I whisper, covering my aching wrist, hoping to keep some of Uri's warmth there.

"I've never hesitated to take what I want through any means necessary. It's not a question of want," he answers cryptically.

"Of what then?"

"Need."

I have the strangest feeling he's talking about something else. Could it be my pain kink? We've never talked about it. I thought the spanking was his way of trying to go along with this preference of mine. Was I wrong?

"Go wash yourself." His tone sounds final and grave.

"Are you serious?" I ask, baffled by his change of mood. He doesn't even want me to help him feel good.

A sudden thought pierces my mind. "Was this a pity fuck?"

"You don't know what you're talking about." He turns his back to me, dismissing me so easily to focus on his guns.

"Don't know?" I repeat, dread and fury forming a ball inside my throat. "Because I have almost zero experience and you have plenty?"

He doesn't deny it. His wordless reply fires a silent bullet straight into my heart. I suspected he fucked around, but having the confirmation hurts so much. Do I even have a right to feel like this? I yank my sweater from the floor and hurry toward the door, needing to lick my wounds in private.

"You're mine, Sari." I hear his words just as I'm about to pass the threshold. "You can't run away from me. Just accept it," he states ominously just before the shooting starts.

I flee to the second floor, lock the door to the bedroom behind me, and then the bathroom door as well.

I'm his? What does that mean? Like a shiny toy sitting on a shelf to be gazed at but not played with? I've never felt like this before with Uri, like I'm trapped. He was the one who showed me I could choose my own path. He encouraged me to pursue what I liked.

I drop the sweater on the floor as my eyes find my reflection in the mirror. Lips chapped, disheveled hair, grim gaze. I'm sticky and exhausted. My body feels sated while my head can't stop spinning with thoughts. I gaze at the redness his slaps left on my side, and when I shift a little bit to the right, I notice the fingerprints on my ass cheeks where his fingers gripped me.

Tears fall down as pleasure and pain overtake me. Because I love the sight of his marks on me, and at the same time, I wish they weren’t there.

When did I start to associate this confusing, unbearable, miserable feeling with Uri?

Maybe it’s true that there’s a moment for two souls. A single, defining moment when they touch fire and fuse together, or burn apart and turn everything to ashes.

Am I going to survive the flames?

After a long shower, I fall asleep in the big bed without unlocking the bedroom door. In my dreams, though, I feel a warm body possessively embrace me. Gentle lips touch my head and my bleeding heart.

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# *seven*

URIEL

I grunt and get more comfortable on the solarium's sofa. My dreads are still damp from the two-hour swim I had in the indoor pool. The physical exertion didn't help with my restlessness. Nor the time spent taking apart and cleaning some of my rifles.

I know what I need; I already booked a room at Madame Claudette's for tonight.

I lift my phone and check Sari's bracelet app. His heart rate is fine and temperature as well. I look at his position again. His pin is still at Rague's house. One of the triplets, Ren, came early this morning to pick him up. They'll help Sully pack for college. It was my turn to help Gabe dispose of his donor, so I hired two bodyguards to follow them. This stalker problem needs to be resolved. I just finished talking to Michael. The guard working at Bear-Stone Labs who was bribed to sneak the package inside the building was killed.

Michael—with the medical examiner—found a small needle mark behind his left ear and a trace of a muscle relaxant called succinylcholine in the guard's blood. A smart choice since it is not normally tested for in toxicology screens. In higher doses, it can paralyze the entire breathing apparatus, and the victim suffocates to death—which is what happened to the guard.

Rami checked the diner's CCTV. A person entered the bathroom thirty seconds after the guard went in. Unfortunately there're no cameras inside, but after fifteen seconds, the same person came out wearing a long coat and a knitted cap, keeping their face down. They are average height and build, we can't discern their gender, the poor quality of the footage doesn't help. Serena followed them outside, but they disappeared in the crowded streets of downtown Chicago.

This is more serious than I anticipated. This sicko is ready to do whatever it takes to reach Sari. It's escalating quickly, and I don't like the direction this fucker is taking us. He needs to be stopped.

Albert E. moves in his sleep on top of my belly while I'm checking the stock market. I stopped by his room earlier as I heard him wheeking and squeaking. I don't fucking care if the critter croaks, but Sari would. After checking the levels of water and food and the room temperature, I decided to keep an eye on him so I took him with me. He seems to enjoy the warmth of my body. Is he purring?

I can't forget the soft smile gracing Sari's face when he looked at it last night. I was instantly hit with the desire to squash the pig. I wanted that sweet expression directed at me and only me. I can't help but glare again at the hairless wiener. What does Sari see in it? Those tufts of hair are ridiculous. I touch the one on his head, pulling a little. I raise a confused brow when his bony leg starts twitching uncontrollably. Sari is way too gentle with it. He seems to like a vigorous rubbing. The wiener is now looking up at me with those small, round eyes asking for more.

It reminds me of Sari's begging expression, those tears making a wet path down his face. My dick had never throbbed with such a need to claim, wreck, utterly destroy someone before. The temptation so consuming, it almost burned me alive. Controlling my needs is something I don't fucking do. Hurting people is more than an urge for me, it's a way of life.

And then there's Sari.

He enjoyed a few spanks, his sensual moans were proof enough of that. But that's nothing to me. He'd break irreparably under my hands if I show him the true extent of what I'm capable of doing. Of what I have been willing—

so fucking eager—to do to satisfy the blood-boiling craving I feel when I have someone yield to me.

Having him trembling with pleasure in my arms feels fucking good, but not enough. The line I drew a long time ago has been working just fine until he started going around letting other men touch what belongs to me. It turned me fucking homicidal. I made him come; he should be thankful and eager for more. Instead he locked himself in the bedroom—forced me to pick the lock—and then acted all busy and distracted this morning. What the fuck is going on in his head? Haven't I been clear enough?

Damn it. Whenever my mind wanders, it finds him.

My phone beeps. A text from Ash, one of the triplets, with a picture of the next tattoo I plan to get.

ASH

Check the design, fucker

ME

Ungrateful dick!

I introduced him to the owner of a tattoo parlor after I saw some incredible drawings in his notebook, and they hired him. His manners remain atrocious, but he acts like a punk toward everybody. His abrasive behavior reminds me of a young me. Nevertheless, the prick will never stand a chance against me.

ASH

*finger flipping emoji* So???

ME

It's passable

ASH

Passable my ass. It's a masterpiece

The twisted pomegranate tree trunk looks papery and rough, the red fruits heavy on the long branches, leaves are falling, floating in the air, creating exactly what I described to him.

ME

When?

ASH

Next Wednesday. Usual time. Don’t be fucking late!

I move to the tracking app again and push on the cameras in Rague’s house. Sari is in the kitchen, sitting at the table with Ren while Sully is getting some snacks from the cabinets. Didn’t he go there to help the kid pack? I sniff. It looks to me like they are just chilling around.

The sunlight refracts on him as he talks, turning his aquamarine eyes into a serene ocean. They stand out for their pure innocence and sweetness.

His coal-black hair is once again tied in a sleek side-braid. Delicate features, a small upturned nose, peach cheekbones. He isn’t wearing his contact lenses today, but opted for his red square glasses.

He suddenly smiles, leaning his slender, graceful body toward Ren. I can’t look away from him. He’s beautiful, but when he smiles, he becomes almost ethereal, surrounded by an inner light, exuding warmth and wholesomeness. I can easily imagine people wanting to hurt that, to possess that. Because I am one of those people. The only rightful owner of all that is Sari.

He stands and goes to Sully to help him out. Is that pert, full ass wrapped in lace under those skintight jeans? He tosses a chip inside his mouth, and I remember those lips wrapped tightly around my dick as his throat sucked the cum out of it. I want him defenseless again. Utterly powerless, only able to take. And take more. The bruises from my fingers, the redness from my palms, the sting from my cock. I want him where he is supposed to be, under me again, over me, around me, any fucking way I can have him. Always returning to me.

Is his genius mind aware of what I want to do? Sometimes I wonder if he knows the vicious, dirty as fuck thoughts I have about him. He’s so fucking naive and gooey inside, anybody could easily take advantage of that. Not on my watch. What belongs to me remains mine unless I say differently.

My stomach starts growling, so I give Sari one last look and move to the kitchen, leaving Albert E. in the cage near the dining table in the corner.

The fridge is filled with food containers from three different places. I don't need to know how to cook when I own more than a few restaurants. I'm about to grab the steak au poivre vert, which the chef at the bistro Le Chat Blanc near the harbor prepares beautifully, when my damn phone starts ringing.

All I want is a good meal and about four hours of uninterrupted sleep before going to the club. Anyone that gets in the way of that has a bloody death wish I'll happily grant.

It's Rami. I asked him to check out an employee at Fine Joe, the café I own on Taylor Street. There were some discrepancies in the books, on top of other things. When I get my answers from the short call I snap my switchblade in the jeans pocket, slide Veronica—my SIG—into the back of my jeans and grab a couple of pretzels with some cheese dip. I put on the denim sherpa tracker jacket and head toward the front door.

The Hummer is still at the car wash—Sari went all out in it—so I get in the Range Rover. I turn on the heated seat and wait a few seconds while the cabin warms before driving off.

Getting into the food business wasn't a calculated choice. I used to model when I was a teenager. The money was good and the job didn't take too much time from my studies. Meg and Linda are loaded, but I wanted something of mine that came from me. When I went to college, I started moving in the right circles, spending time with the *right* people, and stock trading with those modeling earnings. I quickly found out I had a knack for it—even my brothers got more than some extra capital thanks to me. When the opportunity to invest in a sushi restaurant knocked at my door, I took it. From there, I soon made a name for myself and started buying or funding restaurants. Now I own seven, a chain of cafés, and one of organic burger joints, two bars, and a trattoria.

I have managers who take care of the everyday tasks, and I meet them once a month to go over the paperwork. But finding people you can trust is not easy.

Thirty minutes later I park at the back of Fine Joe and swiftly make my way inside the café through the back door. The sweet smell of pastries makes my

stomach rumble. Those pretzels weren't enough to sate my hunger. I move toward the front where everybody is waiting—except Charles, the baker who's working in the kitchen—as I ordered them to do when I called before.

The place is minimalistic yet sophisticated, with soft lighting that casts the space in an inviting, yet awe-inspiring ambiance. The walls are adorned with pictures of coffee fields and tea plants—I hired an interior designer to take care of all this crap. The three barista/waiters and the two assistant bakers are sitting around one of the dark wooden tables on the plush, high-backed chairs. The marble-topped bar stretches across from them, where they serve artisanal smoothies, organic teas, and uniquely fine coffee brews. Patrons can catch a glimpse of the culinary baker and his minions in action through the massive glass panel showing the open kitchen.

Every little detail contributes to an atmosphere of understated luxury.

Contrary to my brother Raph, I try to project a non-threatening image to look approachable to my underlings, unperturbed but assertive. Because you never know when people can be of use. That's why I let my lips curl a little as I reach them.

They greet me with different levels of politeness. I don't like inane chatter or talking for the mere sake of it. I only do that if there's a purpose, an angle I can exploit, usually to feel people out. Today, I just want to hurry this up and go back home.

"Where's Russ?" I ask about the manager.

"In his office," comes Linda's rapid reply.

"Go get him." She runs off as soon as I utter the words.

"Would you like a coffee, boss?" one of the baristas offers me.

I nod. "To go."

I turn to the others. "There have been a couple of heated verbal arguments in the last few weeks, one in front of the customers. Do any of you care to tell me what happened?"

Nobody speaks, suddenly avoiding my eyes, except one guy. His gaze doesn't waver, spine straight, hands balled up. A defensive pose like he's expecting something negative to come his way. If he intends to physically attack me, his small and delicate figure won't help him at all against me.

"Name?"

"Izzy Pratt." His lips turn into a long line, and I suddenly know why.

"You're the one involved in the quarrels."

"Quarrels?" He sniffs bitterly. "I don't know who your source is, but that's not the word I'd use."

"And what word is?" I accept the coffee the barista hands me, tilting my head at him without taking my eyes off Izzy Pratt.

"Bullying, harassment, threats."

I like his boldness, but it reminds me too much of Lori.

"Mr. Mahoe. What a pleasure!" The manager, Russ, finally arrives, looking like he has not a worry in the world. He reminds me of Ken from Barbie. However I can read anxiety in his stiff smile.

"Sorry for my tardiness, I was organizing some papers in the office."

I ignore his ass licking and get straight to the chase. "You're fired. Pack your shit and go."

There's a moment of silence, and then a gasp and low murmurs go around the room.

"What? But…why? I've been doing a great job in the last month," Russ sputters with a desperate expression, and I know why. Yesterday, Rami cleaned out his bank account and got him evicted. Now he's losing his job. This is nothing compared to what I really want to do to him.

"You've got your girlfriend a job here and a quick promotion as the assistant manager without any references. You're also fired, by the way." I wave at Linda while taking a sip from my coffee. This is good stuff; I should get some of these beans for home. "And also you let your drug

dealer friends set up shop inside my café." I took care of those fuckers already by giving an anonymous tip to the cops. They were picked up two days ago.

"That's not true, I-I swear," he says pathetically. What a fucking waste of space this guy is.

"Go before I call the cops."

"You have no proof!" he barks.

"You turned off the CCTV inside the café, but not outside in the back alley where you and your pals smoked weed together during work hours." Fucking amateur. "I have plenty, shithead. You also owe me seven hundred dollars for all the free food you and Linda gave away to friends and family."

His face has turned red, body trembling with anger. If he tries to pounce on me, I have a nice surprise for him—witnesses be damned. It would be self-defense, and Veronica is registered. I almost hope he does attack me. But time passes, and the worm doesn't make a move.

"What the fuck are you still doing here? The holier-than-thou boss spoke." I give him a long, challenging look since I've heard him call me that behind my back. "Get the fuck out before I make you," I hiss with an incinerating glare.

He finally flees, tail between his legs, toward the office with Linda following him like a lost puppy. "You." I point to the barista who gave me the coffee. "Make sure he doesn't steal anything." He nods and quickly jogs after them.

"You can go back to work," I tell the others.

I'll keep my eye on Russ, and if he crosses the line at any time, I'll stuff every hole in his body with bullets. Nobody fucks with me. The thought that he's been doing it for a month enrages me. I started having my suspicions about two weeks after he started, but Rami told me we needed more proof. Just in case. Now I have enough.

"Are you going to fire me too?"

I lower my gaze to Izzy Pratt. He’s still here.

“Since they bullied me because—”

“I don’t care,” I cut him off, but he keeps talking.

“Because I’m trans.” He widens his arms to show me…what exactly?

I give him a once-over. Big lips, long hair. The level of wariness in his eyes is odd for a person this young, unclouded of any delusions. Which tells me he had a rough life. “Does being trans affect your work efficiency?”

He frowns. “Uhm, no.”

“Izzy, here is your batch.” Charles comes out of the kitchen to leave a tray on the counter. He tilts his head at me and goes back to work.

“I don’t remember those pastries on the menu.”

“Oh, I made them.” His cheeks turn pink. “I noticed most customers take coffees to go, and the cakes we provide are not easy to carry.” He shrugs.

I make my way to the tray. The presentation is nice, they look inviting and smell good.

“These are strawberry tarts, and those are lemon cheesecake bars.”

I toss a round tart in my mouth, and fuck, it’s good, at an incredible level. It melts on my tongue, the balance between sweet and sour is perfect. Now that I think about it, a week ago, Charles told me there was an employee who is very good at baking. The Russ and Linda fuck-up discovery pushed that discussion aside.

“Do you have a culinary degree?” I ask.

“No.” He turns his eyes down and sighs. That must be the reason why he got a job as a barista and not as a baker.

“I’m moving you to the kitchen. I want these pastries on the menu,” I let him know.

“What?” he replies, seemingly baffled. Deciphering people’s emotions is a drag sometimes. And why do they always need explanations? Can’t they

just take what they’re given? Sari included. Damn it.

“You’re the best employee here, always on time, never complain, a hard worker. Also, you could be an alien, and I wouldn’t care. That’s your private life. None of my business. I’m your boss, not your pastor.”

Nobody bothered me when I was finding my way, and I turned into the best version of myself. I’m simply giving Izzy the same courtesy. Why? Because an idea is whirling inside my head. I saw a for sale sign a few weeks ago outside an old bakery near Rami’s warehouse apartment. My eyes fall on the pastries Izzy made. This could be a new opportunity for a franchise.

“I’ll give you a three-month trial. Keep the status of this café high. Don’t, and you’re fired,” I finish. Three months is enough time to see how he does and to start planning accordingly.

He is still looking at me like a dead fish, mouth open and all, but he nods after a second.

I keep talking as I walk toward the office, expecting him to follow, and he does. “I appoint you as the temporary manager until I find a permanent one. You’ll have double salary until then. Your first task is to find two more servers, take care of that quickly. I’ll send you an email with whatever you need to know about inventory, quality control, menu planning, cleaning equipment, and so on. You’ve been working here for two months right?”

“Yes.”

“So you know some things already. My phone number is only for emergencies. I’ll see you in a week. I expect a full briefing.”

He suddenly grabs my hand in his. “Mr. Mahoe. Boss, thank you so much for this opportunity. Baking is my life. I won’t let you down.” His beaming smile is not as annoying as I expected. The way he’s looking at me—I like to be adored by people even though they are only little ants to me. Inconsequential, insignificant. But if Izzy Pratt is as good as I believe, he could be of use.

“Let go,” I deadpan, more than ready to leave.

He suddenly drops my hand and starts backing away. “Sorry. I’ll see you in a week.” He scurries away.

When I get to the parking lot through the backdoor, a loud, irritating jingle hits my ears. It’s coming from an ice cream truck across the road. I see Russ and Linda leaving in their car; I can hear their heated fight even though the car windows are closed. How much I’d like to punish them, see their suffering, blood rolling down their cheeks. My cock turns hard at the prospect, and Sari’s face suddenly pops up in front of my eyes. I’m associating sadistic pleasure with him now. Fuck!

I enter my car and slam the door.

I feel the usual thirst for him burning the back of my throat. Is that birthmark under his right nipple still there? I couldn’t see it last night, that sexy bra was in the way. Fuuuuck, that flimsy lingerie he wears, if I pull on it, tear it right off, it will mark his smooth, diaphanous, perfectly pale skin so easily. The image makes my balls boil, dick leak, teeth grit.

Tonight, I need to work on someone at the club. Otherwise I know exactly how this is going to end with Sari. I fucking hate the restraints I’ve forced on myself. He’s mine! And I should do whatever I want with what’s mine.

Like he knows I’m thinking about him, I get a text.

SARI

Ollie and Rague will be busy with three donors. I’ll keep Sully company tonight.

ME

Let me know when Rague and Ollie are back. I’ll come pick you up

SARI

No need. I’ll sleep here

A furious roar leaves my lips. The one emotion I understand above all is anger. Why is he being so fucking unreasonable? He’s putting distance between us again. I made him fucking come last night; he screamed like a whore begging for more. What else does he want?

My impulsiveness is screaming at me to go get him and lock him up.

There’ll always be an us, even if I have to pave the way with blood and screams to make him realize it.

As I look ahead, my eyes catch a figure a few feet away leaning against the café in the back alley. He’s wearing a gray hoodie, horrible cargo pants, and a white mask. What the fuck is Ezra doing here?

I get out of my car and head toward him, gun still tucked in my pants. The ice cream truck is still there. There’s a closed sign on the window, but that stupid melody is on.

“Take off that ridiculous thing,” I order Ezra, stopping a few feet away.

“Like you don’t wear a mask every day.”

I know he doesn’t mean literally.

He grabs it and lowers it. “Everybody wears a mask; the only difference is that you can see mine easily.”

I fucking hate that I agree with him.

“Why are you following me?”

He studies me before saying, “Boredom can kill.”

His vague answers are getting on my nerves more than the short, repetitive fucking melody coming from the truck. Ezra suddenly turns halfway, his hand slides on the side of his cargo pants and then his arm swings outward, swiftly tossing a knife in the air. The blade hits the clown face on top of the ice cream truck where the speaker is. He gets it right in the mouth and the jingle finally ends.

He faces me again. “You’re welcome.”

He’s more unhinged than I thought. And sort of fun. Should I ask Rami to erase any street CCTV that caught Ezra tossing the knife? Nah, that’s his fucking problem.

“I’ll ask you again, why are you in Chicago, Ezra?”

He smirks. “I faked my death. Phoenix forced my hand, screwed with my life. So I killed…myself. I can’t get back to my job until I get rid of

Phoenix.”

“So how are you working then?”

“Under assumed identities. But that’s not why I am here.” His voice deepens.

“No?”

“The guy you live with, Sariel…”

I hear the menacing growl leaving my lips.

Ezra’s smile widens. “I have no ill intentions toward him. I know he’s one of your foster brothers. But who is he to you?”

“Mine,” I pronounce slowly.

“Why?” He seems just curious.

“Don’t have to explain shit to you.” I’m acting defensively, but I always do when Sari is concerned.

“True.” He nods. “He’s mine as well, then.”

A wave of fury washes through me. My body moves before my brain even processes the words. My switchblade is at his throat, pushing until I see a drop of blood forming on his skin.

“The fuck he is. I’m ready to mutilate you if you try anything.”

“You’ve never been good at sharing. But you’ve also never given a fuck about anyone. He is mine, though,” he repeats, making me curl my lips to show him my teeth. “Just like you are. Like you’ve always been Uriel. Look into my eyes, your eyes.”

Like looking in a mirror. His gaze is slightly darker. It’s unsettling and so… *familiar*.

“Still denying it?” he challenges me. “If you don’t back off I won’t think twice before stabbing you in the guts.” I feel a sharp point poking my stomach. A knife? How many does he carry?

The grip on my switchblade tightens before I pull back and clean it on my jeans. I pocket the blade as I utter, “Are you denying the fact that you evaded me for years?”

“I had my reasons.” He avoids answering again.

“Will you share those reasons?”

“I’m not good at sharing either,” he teases me.

I never thought I’d be talking to him like this one day. I always imagined finding him on the other side of the line, turned evil. I envisioned killing him. That could still happen.

“It’s odd how you don't get bored of him after all those years together.”

“Who?”

“Sariel.” Why the fuck is he talking about Baby Blue again? I don’t like his name on Ezra’s lips. “Should I go talk to him about it?”

“He’ll be the last thing you’ll ever see,” I hiss the threat, ready to follow it through if I have to.

“Then tell me,” he insists with a nonchalant tone. Why does he want to know when he doesn’t even look interested?

“I’ve seen his face since I was eight and still I’m not tired of it. I keep on wanting more of it. Of his blushes, his smiles, the way he bites the corner of his lower lip and pulls on his braid when he’s nervous. He. Belongs. To me. Don’t really care if your psychotic brain gets it.”

“A person I once knew told me Plato’s theory. Do you know it?”

What the fuck is he talking about now? I shake my head, but he tells me anyway.

“Plato believed that humans originally consisted of four arms and legs and two faces. Zeus, king of the gods, felt threatened by their power and split them all in half, condemning them all to spend their lives trying to complete themselves.”

“I don’t believe all that shit.” I tsk. “I actually think we are born complete and lose part of ourselves because of others. We can give it away, or it is taken from us.” I pause. “Either way, we need that completion, and we find ways to fill that hole.”

“Even if momentarily,” he adds annoyingly.

“Sari will never be momentary,” I snarl.

He hums noncommittally. “The stalker situation, don’t treat it lightly.”

“What do you know about that?” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Not much since Serena keeps me out now.” He scratches his forehead below the red bandana; he has a little scar there. I suddenly remember him tripping on a glass bottle and hitting his head over the table edge as we were running from our drunken father.

“I’ve had my fair share of encounters with obsessed wackos in the past. Keep Sariel safe.”

Is he for real? “Why did you come see me after all these years?”

“I always kept an eye on you. You looked okay. I was okay. Why disrupt it?” He shrugs.

“How did you escape from the facility, Ezra?” *If you actually did.*

“The scientists moved me to another place just a few days before you were all released. Again two years later to a bunker deep in the mountains.”

That’s why Meg and Linda couldn’t find him. “So how did you escape from the bunker?”

Before he replies, I give him a stop-with-the-bullshit glare. “We can go back to knifing each other if you prefer. See who gets sliced more.”

I can see how the knife fight feels tempting for him. It is for me as well.

“A nurse,” he finally says. “He was…different from the rest of the fuckers. Carried me out when the place caught on fire. Everybody else left me there for dead. He got me out.”

So, he had someone. “How old were you?”

“Eleven.”

“Fuck!” He was tortured and experimented on for three more years. Linda was a little worried about the repercussions on his mental stability if he had been kept longer as a subject. I don’t know what’s inside his head, but I’m pretty sure that’s not a good road to go down.

“I don’t follow your cute code. I kill who I need to kill.” I see the bloodthirst in his eyes, same as mine. “And now Phoenix is the one who has to die. But I need people with certain skills to take that fucker down.”

“What do you know about him? If you want to work together, you have to come clean.”

“And I will. As soon as I’m sure your foster brothers won’t kill me on sight.” He raises his brow challengingly.

I pucker my lips in fake ponderance. “You have to prove to them you’re not a threat to the family.”

“Not to you?”

“More so with me.”

He lets out a chuckle. It takes me back to when we were kids throwing stones into the river and seeing them bounce. Ezra was good at it, laughed every single time.

“How about I give you the guy who made the poison that almost killed your foster mother?”

I grind my teeth as my gaze turns into a searing glower. “How the fuck did you get that info?”

“You have your ways. I have mine. Do you want him or not?”

“Who?” I snarl, not liking anything about this, especially the lack of control. Impotent is a word that doesn’t exist in my vocabulary.

“Marlon Finch. He’s a retired chemist. Lives in New York.”

“How do you know it’s him?” I ask again.

“People like to brag, especially when their audience doesn’t fucking care.” He shrugs. His nonchalant behavior as he discloses such important information which could take us a step closer to Phoenix irks me deeply. “I have an archery range back at home, kind of like your firing range. I’m curious to know if we have more things in common apart from our faces,” he then adds, changing topic so damn easily.

“What's next? Grabbing a drink and talking about life?”

“More like kill someone, compare our…skills.”

I’m actually tempted. I have a donor who wouldn’t be too hard to grab.

“Your phone is ringing,” Ezra lets me know.

This thing has been going off all day.

“What?” I answer, without looking at the caller ID.

“Sari got another package,” Rami says in a grim tone. “The doorman of his building called me after I asked him to let me know if any mail came.”

“That means the stalker doesn’t know Sari is staying with you,” I hear Rague add. He’s right, otherwise they’d have sent the package to the lake house.

“Did you open it?” I walk to my car and get in. I glare at Ezra as he suddenly takes the passenger seat.

“Yes, he brought it to the base. And I’m ready to disembowel the demented lunatic.” Ollie’s voice is shaken.

“What was inside?” Ezra suddenly interjects into the conversation, leaning closer to the phone I’m holding near my ear. Does he have enhanced hearing?

“Who the fuck is that?” Raph asks.

“Ezra,” he replies. “Who the fuck are you?”

“His other psychopathic brother,” Raph counters. “We have some questions for you…Ezra.” The warning is clear in my brother’s voice.

“And I will answer them…in time.”

I push Ezra away from me, turn on the car, and activate the Bluetooth speaker.

“Are you okay, Uri?” Ollie asks.

“He’s okay…for now,” Ezra taunts them, triggering Rague’s enraged growl.

“Hey, listen up, elusive fucker, you’ll be the one bleeding if you touch so much as a dread on his—”

He doesn’t let Rami finish. “Jeez. They have no faith in your abilities whatsoever,Uriel.” Ezra snorts.

“I meant to say, before you rudely interrupted me, that he’d be the one making you bleed,” Rami clarifies.

“He already did.” He rubs the blood away from his neck. Oh please, I simply nicked him.

“Good,” Rague grunts out.

“Where’s all this brotherly coziness coming from?” Raph asks, because making Ezra bleed equals coziness for him.

“Jealous?” I hear Rami.

“Package,” I remind them.

Ollie is the one to finally tell me. “Another message, same typewriter. ‘*We belong together, you’ll see it soon enough*.’”

“There was also a black ball gag and pink lipstick inside the box,” Michael adds.

“*Pink lipstick*?” Ezra mouths. Like that’s the only weird thing.

“What else? Talk,” I demand, getting more worked up by the minute. I grab my phone and check that Sari’s location is unchanged.

“A bunch of razor blades.” Raph sounds grim.

Fuck!

“No fingerprints. But we found a brown hair on the elastic of the ball gag,” Rami says. “I checked some databases, and the DNA belongs to Francis Moreland, a scientist working for Abbot Laboratories. He disappeared for two days, then was found naked and unconscious in a park in Norridge. He had bruises on his cheeks, around his neck, wrists, and ankles, like he had been restrained.”

“What the fuck!” I exclaim. I need to protect Sari, to keep him close, so close I tuck him under my skin. Flay myself and wrap him in it.

“I thought that guy was found dead, raped, and beaten to death,” Ollie interjects.

“No, that was another body, a university student. It was found on the outskirts of Chicago in some woods. Hunter is helping the police with the case. It’s a very disturbing one,” Rami states. “Francis Moreland is still alive, and he was drugged. They found a needle puncture behind his ear, just like the guard from Bear-Stone Labs. But in Mr. Moreland’s blood, there were only traces of a tranquilizer.” The more my brother talks, the hotter my blood turns. It’s pulsing in my veins, whispering, “*Kill! Protect! Kill!*”

“They also found vaginal discharge on his body,” Michael adds. “The DNA is in the database, but it doesn’t match anyone.”

“So it was a woman who kidnapped and had their way with him.” I shuffle among my memories, looking for all the women who’ve approached Sari in the past months.

“Maybe. Hunter went to talk to the victim. He doesn’t remember anything from the kidnapped time, but he said he received disturbing packages months prior. Stalkerish packages,” Raph lets me know.

“Fuck!” I cuss, this time out loud.

“We should tell Sari.” Michael’s tone is serious.

“He’s still pretty shaken up,” I say. I don’t want him to have another panic attack.

“Let him enjoy tonight,” Rami suggests. “We’ll tell him tomorrow.”

“I will,” I declare. “Are you working on finding any more links between Francis Moreland and Sari?”

“Serena, Opal, and Dare are all on it.”

“I’ll put more bodyguards on Sari. He won’t go anywhere alone.” It’s more a promise to myself. I should go too, but first I need to vent.

“Gabe and Lori are on their way there now,” Ollie lets me know.

“I see why you haven’t killed any of them, they are useful,” Ezra declares.

“He almost got me twice,” Rami says.

“We were young,” Rague feels the need to clarify.

“I lost count,” Raph scoffs.

“Want to get a head start on our wagers on you, Ezra?” Ollie asks him.

“Wager?” I see his eyes glimmer with interest.

“Thirteen to one odds that Uri will kill you.”

I already know who was the one against. My sweet Sari.

“And what if I get all of you to trust me by the end of this month? What will I win?”

“Other than a unicorn farting cupcakes? That will never happen,” Raph states.

“Challenge accepted,” Ezra replies with a smirk.

I choose that moment to let them know about the chemist who made Meg’s poison. The conversation grows heated, more questions, threats and insults are directed at Ezra, until I hear some fumbling, and then Raph’s voice is clear, like everybody else is in the background. He must have turned off the speaker.

“You going to Sari?”

“No.”

“No? And how long until you do?” he insists. He’s the only one who can somewhat understand how I feel about Sari since he’s the same with Michael.

“I’m going to Madame Claudette’s tonight.”

“Piglet,” Raph calls Michael. “No club tonight. Uri is going.”

This is new. “Since when are you both frequenting the club?”

“Club?” Ezra asks. I ignore him.

I can imagine Michael’s blushing face as he says, “We discovered we could have fun in one of those rooms a few weeks ago. But the last thing I want is to accidentally bump into you”

“Oh, it’s that kind of club,” Ezra exclaims, looking at his phone.

“There’s no website for it. It’s a very exclusive establishment. The only way to get in is by knowing another member,” I tell him.

“We’ll go tomorrow then,” Michael states.

“Where?” I hear Rami.

“Madame Claudette’s,” Michael replies.

“Maybe we should go check it out, Grizzly,” I think Rami tells Hunter. His voice is too far from the phone.

“I don’t fucking share, Red,” his boyfriend answers back with a grunt. *That, I heard well.*

“And you think my husband does?” Michael sniffs.

“You can choose a private room. Not everybody likes an audience like Uri,” Raph taunts me. Like I fucking care.

I hear a ding. “I’m getting another call.” It’s Gabe.

“Alright, we’ll let you know if there’s any news.” Raph pauses before adding, “And Ezra, I’ll see you soon.”

I hang up as I hear Ezra’s snort and connect the other call.

“Super Model.”

It’s Lori. “Gremlin.”

“When are you going to bump him on the head with a giant bat and drag him by his hair into your luxurious cave?”

“I hope you’re not talking about me,” Ezra cuts in.

“And you are?” Gabe asks.

“It’s Robin Hood, isn’t it?” Lori doesn’t let him speak. “Can you take a selfie with your twinsy-twin and send it to me? It’s for a friend…for *research* purposes.”

I don’t want to know what friend and what kind of *research* he’s talking about.

“I don’t have your phone number,” is Ezra’s comeback. Like I’ll let him take a picture of us.

“It’s—”

“Lori!” I hear Bez growling.

“Okay, Okay,” Lori tries to assuage his fiancé. “The psycho club in this family is getting bigger by the day.”

“Are you almost at Rague’s?” I ask.

“Ten minutes away,” Gabe flatly tells me.

“How many texts have you sent Sari since you left him?” Lori’s question irks me. And I let him know with a growl.

“Translating from controlling sociopathic language, a two-second growl equals ten to fifteen texts.”

Ezra is looking at me with a puzzled look.

“I can’t kill him. Gabe won’t let me,” I explain.

“Like you could take me.” Lori sniffs. “Plus, you bloody love me.”

“I can’t love. I’m a sociopath.”

Lori ignores my words. “Robin Hood, since I don’t want you to ruin such a cute bromance, I’m going to warn you about Uri and the fact that he put Sari in a state of eternal dibs.”

“Since he was six,” Gabe adds.

They call it my obsession. But is it really an obsession when I feel like Sari is a part of me? Can I be obsessed with myself?

“Michael just texted me. You’re going to that club tonight. Sure you need it?”

I don’t answer Lori’s question. It’s none of his fucking business.

“Do you have a case of pathological denial? I don’t care if you’re the most proficient torturer who’s ever walked this earth, I’ll hit your hard head with my custom-made spiked bat until I feel the crack of sanity and see the red fountain of acceptance. Otherwise, let Sari move on and live his life.”

“Move on,” Ezra echoes, making my skin crawl.

“He can start dating again the cute professor,” Lori keeps going.

Trent fucking Dohner. He must be the colleague who contacted Sari the other day.

“He can’t date a corpse,” I snarl. I’m breathing hard. I didn’t realize I’d moved so close to the car screen. I’ll tear out his guts, crush his heart, and perforate his lungs. I’ll make him choke on his own blood before I split him in half and pulverize his bones; there won’t be anything left. Not even a tiny speck in the air.

“Then what do you want from him, Uri? You keep meddling in his life. He can’t remain celibate forever.”

“He won’t,” I say simply. Ezra is strangely silent next to me.

“You should do him then…just saying. We are at Rague’s. Think about it.” Lori hangs up.

Ezra is staring at me. There’s a strange sparkle in his eyes; I can’t quite grasp it. “You said he was yours.”

“He is!”

“Doesn’t look like it since he still can choose someone else.” Is he talking about himself?

I need to show him the depth of my ownership and clarify without any doubt why he has to stay away from Sari.

“I’ll carve my name on the delicate skin of his chest. I’ll hear him say my name, scream it at the top of his lungs as I painfully penetrate him so damn deep I will become part of him, as he’s already part of me. I’ll own not only his body but his whole being, feel it under my bruising fingers as I squeeze it until he pierces my skin and reaches the void where my heart should be. He will not be able to push me away ever again.”

“Take what’s yours then, Uriel, and do it quickly.” He gets out of the car and slams the door. And I don’t do anything to stop him, because I know he’ll be back to see me soon. Otherwise I’ll get to him. I know how he moves around the city now.

His words keep echoing in my head long after he disappears from my sight.

*Take what’s yours.*

*Take what’s yours.*

*Quickly.*

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# *eight*

SARIEL

How is it possible that I can smell Uri’s scent on my clothes? Is it because I live at his house? His rich smell permeating the air must have penetrated all my garments as I moved around.

*And I’m thinking about him again.* Even though I’m spending a nice time with Sully and Ren. They’re talking about university. Sully seems quite excited, asking Ren a bunch of questions. He’ll move to campus in a month. They won’t be sharing the same room, though. Ren has his own place, and Sully insisted on trying to live in the dormitory for at least six months.

He looks ready. A little nervous, but who wouldn’t be. I was terrified; going to college at fifteen was quite stressful. I didn’t enjoy the student life like others, too young and busy with my studies. But Sully is nineteen, brave and outgoing. He’ll integrate in no time.

That reminds me of the talk I had with Michael. He told me he saw Trent at a café near the university. He started working at the University of Illinois a few weeks ago, after moving back from Seattle, I think. Michael teaches in a different department, but bumping into each other must not be so uncommon. Michael said Trent asked after me. I don’t know how I feel about all this. About him. Not after what has happened with Uri.

I’ll see Trent at my lecture since he texted me he’ll be there. But do I care about his presence?

“I’ll be on campus to give a lecture on Friday,” I tell Ren, trying to clear my head.

“I saw it in the course material. The lecture hall is a twenty-minute walk from the veterinary building. I have to talk to a teacher, but I’ll pass by if I can make it.”

“Hope you’ll give more lectures so that I can come too in the future,” Sully says sweetly.

“I definitely will.” I smile and take a sip of orange juice. My eyes find the nature outside the kitchen window; it’s a white smooth blanket of quiet. Rague has quite a few acres of vegetation around his cottage; it looks lovely in spring. I’m so taken by my work sometimes I forget to just…stay still and enjoy.

Ren’s snort brings me back to the kitchen.

“Do you know a club called Madame Claudette’s?” He’s frowning at his phone.

I shake my head.

“Why?” Sully asks, placing two slices of cheesecake in front of us on the wooden dining table. I quickly dive into it. Ollie makes the best cheesecakes.

“I think Lori texted me this message by mistake.” He shows us the text.

LORI

Bones! How can Super Model go to Madame Claudette’s kink club?? Bloody fuck! He’s a daft moron!

Bones is what Lori calls Michael, and Super Model is Uri.

“Madame Claudette’s… Isn’t it one of those exclusive places?” Ren makes a suggestive face I don’t understand. “I think I heard Rami talking about it to Hunter.”

“What kind of exclusive places?” I whisper. I have an ominous feeling all of a sudden.

“Ah, maybe I’m wrong. It could be a boring gentlemen’s club.”

“Like one where women are banned and whiskered men drink scotch and smoke cigars while reading newspapers in front of a fireplace?” Sully gives us a very vivid image.

I can’t picture Uri in a place like that, though, if they still exist.

“Women are not banned, I can assure you.” I know what Ren is implying now, and the images that his words evoke make my heart lose a beat.

I stand up and move toward the sofa a few feet away, hearing Sully’s laugh. I tap on Lori’s contact, but it goes to voicemail, so I go for Michael’s.

“What’s Madame Claudette’s club?” I ask, without giving him a chance to speak as he picks up.

“Who told you about it?”

“Does it matter?” When he doesn’t reply, I continue, “Does Uri go there?”

There’s a moment of silence. “Yes, he’s a member.” Raph is the one to answer.

Another of his secrets comes to light. Another stab to the chest.

“What kind of club is it?”

“It’s an establishment that caters to individuals with specific tastes.”

“What tastes, Raph?” My voice is trembling, and I’m glad I’m sitting on the sofa or my legs would have given out under me.

“If you really want to find out, you should go see for yourself.”

“Raph, no!” I hear Michael scold him.

“He’s the one who wants to know, babe.”

Yes, I do. Of all my brothers, Raph is the only one who treats me like a proper adult. He shields me from the outside world just like the others do, but he also encourages me to have my own experiences to make my own mistakes. To just be.

“Maybe he’ll even find *his taste*.” Raph means sexual taste, doesn’t he? I already know mine; it’s the reason why Uri didn’t want me to touch him last night—after he made me come. Isn’t it? I need answers.

“Send me the details,” I breathe out.

“It opens at nine.”

“Sari…” Michael doesn’t say anything else, but his voice sounds uncertain and almost tortured.

“Don’t tell Uri,” I say before ending the call. The phone is shaking in my hands as Serena announces Lori and Gabe’s arrival. I can see Gabe’s car driving down the cottage driveway on the large screen near the front door.

My head is spinning like a whirlwind when they make their way inside a few moments later. I leave the sofa and take a few steps toward them. Lori is as bubbly as always, but his smile drops when his eyes find mine.

“Did you know?” I ask him.

“Know what?” Gabe asks.

I glance at him before looking back at Lori. “Madame Claudette’s. You texted Ren instead of Michael.”

“Oh.” Lori looks relieved for a moment, but then he curses loudly while checking his phone.

“You knew Uri was a member,” I accuse him. Why has he been encouraging me to go for him, when he knew about the club?

“I discovered it a while back.” I see remorse on his face, but it doesn’t make me feel better. “But we all know who he wants; it doesn’t matter if he’s going to the club tonight,” Lori quickly adds.

“Tonight?” I snap. Oh God, I’m such an idiot. That’s why he didn’t order me to come back to the lake house. Me, sleeping here actually turned out perfect for him.

“We all knew about Madame Claudette’s,” Gabe decides to let me know. “It was never a secret.”

Oh, but it was. “Of course you all did. As usual, I’m the only one in the dark.” The weak, naive brother who can’t protect himself. I can feel their pitying gazes heavy on me.

“What he does there, Angel—”

I interrupt Lori’s explanation, “No! I’ll soon find out what Uri actually does there.”

“What—?”

I spin and walk down the corridor, going inside Ragne and Ollie’s room. I sit on their bed. Why am I even this upset? We fooled around a couple of times, and once I was under the influence. For him it must have been nothing. Does he even know how I feel about him? How I’ve always felt? Does he care? Of course he doesn’t, he’s a sociopath.

A bitter laugh leaves my lips. I see a shadow moving toward me as Sully stops on the threshold.

“What do you call…when you feel both relieved and in pain?” I ask, my voice breaking on the last word.

“Lost?”

I nod. “Yeah, that’s exactly it.”

I have always thought my relationship with Uri was like a huge wave. An overwhelming wave that swept me in one direction, then the other, almost drowning me. Then left me to dry on the seashore, still craving the all-consuming feeling only he can arise inside me.

My feet are sweating in the delicate red slippers that the woman behind the counter in Madame Claudette’s lobby offered me. As I make my way down the plain staircase, cushioned only by a thin carpeting over stone, I notice

stares of appreciation from strangers. My breath catches as a nauseating sensation surges through me, not because other men are looking at me, but because Uri probably sent that same heated stare to someone else.

I walk straight to the bar; the slippers make no sound on the sparkly white floor. The red marble counter feels cold as I grab the edge to sit on one of the high stools. The weak yellow lights cast an eerie glow over the large room. There are few people sitting on the purple velvet sofas situated all around. Some half naked, kneeling, kissing, laughing, others in weird positions like the guy who's being used as a footrest or the woman wearing a collar and neighing like a horse while her *owner* parades her around.

I don't know what kind of place this is, but I'm way out of my comfort zone. For a moment, I think about leaving. But I'm tired of running away. I clench my hand and keep looking around. I don't see Uri, but I know he's here. Rami used the tracker under his ear to get his location. He's not supposed to do it, but I asked, and although my brothers treat me like a kid, they can also never say no to me. They still felt the need to let me hear their strong oppositions to my coming here—objections I ignored.

I pull on the black bracelet around my wrist. The sight of it makes me want to rip it off since it's a clear reminder of my unrequited love.

When the bartender comes my way, I try to ask about Uri, but I soon learn that it's all anonymous, and strictly against the rules to disclose members' identities. From the corner of my eye, I see someone taking the chair near me, even though there's many unoccupied.

"Hey, little thing, are you interested in some fun?"

I turn my face to the man, and the first feeling that hits me is caution. He feels and looks slimy, with his spiked, gelled hair and large smirk.

"I'm looking for my…someone."

"I'm better than someone, little thing." His leery eyes are stripping me bare. He's handsome, but there's something dark in his blue eyes. I'm not afraid, but I've seen those same shadows in my brothers' gazes, and let's face it, they aren't the purest souls.

"No, thank you." I try to stay still when his hand lands on my forearm.

“If you change your mind, I can make you forget about them in a heartbeat.” His grip tightens before he releases me and leaves.

That wasn’t so bad.

“An ex?” I turn toward the voice. There’s a guy two seats down from mine. He’s slick, built, and looks nice, but does nothing for me.

“No,” I simply reply, thanking the bartender for the gin and tonic.

“You look lost. Maybe I can point you in the right direction. What are you into?”

“I’m—” I can’t finish the sentence and blush instead.

“Don’t feel embarrassed, this is the place where your desires can come true. No judgment.” He points at a guy who’s sucking on a pacifier while snuggling on an older man’s lap.

“And it’s not always about sex. Some people just need to be someone else or their real self for a few hours.”

What is Uri doing here then? He can be himself at the base. Is there more to him I don’t know about? The thought hurts so badly.

“You look pale. Scott, a shot of vodka,” the nice guy calls the bartender. “Here, drink this.” He hands me the little glass a few seconds later.

As soon as I down it, a loud cough rips out of my chest. My throat is on fire.

“You fucking act like you need someone to take care of you. Are you a submissive or a little?”

“A what?” I gasp out, trying to clear my voice.

“Guess not. What are you doing here?” He looks at me with a curious expression.

“I told you I’m looking for someone.”

“We don’t do names here. Describe him.”

“He has long dreads and piercings all over his face.”

“I think that’s the Pain Giver. Does he have I’ll-kill-you-if-you-come-closer brown eyes?”

I nod with my mouth open in shock. “Pain Giver?”

“That’s what he’s called around here. I saw him going toward the rooms a few minutes before. He always takes guys into room three.” He whistles, pointing to my right at a dark corridor. “Once, by mistake, I entered the gallery and got a peek, but I’m not really into D/S, B&D, and all that sadomasochistic stuff.”

His words splinter something inside me. Cold sweat envelops me while my head feels on fire. Every searing thought flows out of me in the form of tears. One drop, two drops, three, four, fivesixseveneightnineteen until I lose count. It feels like Uri lifted me up so high in the air over the sky, the moon and the stars, and then dropped me to the ground. I’m still coming down, a fast free fall. I can hardly breathe; what happens when I crash?

“I’m…what…am I doing…here? Such an idiot.” I can barely get the words out.

Another shot is pushed in front of me, and I gulp it down.

“Don’t feel stupid, just remember some people voted for Donald Trump,” the nice guy tries to joke, but I can’t find any mirth left in me.

He’s giving me a pitiful look. God, I hate that look.

“Drink.”

Another shot goes down.

“Better?”

“Worse.” The tears keep rolling down, but I’m not sure if it’s because of Uri or the burning sensation the vodka is creating.

“Sorry, I didn’t know you were serious about him, I’ve never seen him with the same guy here. I expected more of an angry soap opera reaction.”

Maybe I should do that.

“I have to leave you now. My pet is here. Do you want me to call you a cab?” He pats my head like you’d do…a pet.

“No,” I sniff pathetically. “I have a driver and two bodyguards waiting for me outside.”

“Okay. If you decide to try something new, come visit us in room six. You can watch if you want.”

I nod as he leaves, but I know what I have to do. It’s the reason why I came to the club. I take a couple of deep breaths and suck some courage inside my body as I slide off the stool and wipe off the tears from my cheeks. I don’t feel drunk, and that’s okay, I need to see this with clear eyes. I need to see the *Pain Giver*.

I slowly but purposefully walk toward the black corridor. There are gray doors on each side, the numbers are not in order. I can hear a moan coming from room number nine, then a scream. I quickly step away and keep going until I get to room three’s gallery. My trembling hand grabs the knob, and I let out a long trembling breath as I open the door and step inside. My heart feels like it is about to leap out of my chest.

“Cry for me!” It’s the first thing I hear. Uri’s voice, the exact same words and the exact same tone he used with me.

My stomach lurches, my whole present narrows down to him and him alone. He steals my undivided attention, wearing black leather pants and a black button-up shirt with rolled sleeves. In his hand is a long whip that almost reaches his bare feet. It feels like I’m having one of my X-rated dreams where Uri is the protagonist. But my usual heart-pounding euphoria is missing.

A whimper resounds, and it’s like a veil is lifted from my eyes and I can see my surroundings. The king bed covered in black and gray silk sheets, the table filled with sex toys and condoms, and the whimpering man tied to a wooden pole wearing only lace lingerie and fishnet stockings.

The scene in front of me is like a mental punch in the gut. My stomach lurches again, but this time my dinner is dangerously close to climbing back up.

The guy turns his face toward me. He has a ball gag in his mouth, long black hair tied in a braid, pale skin, a frail constitution, and blue eyes so similar to mine but filled with utter ecstasy. As soon as I realize how alike we are, I can't keep it in anymore. The contents of my stomach go right onto the red carpet. I kneel on the floor near one of the chairs facing the glass wall and grab a napkin from the table on my right to clean my mouth.

My eyes move again to the scene of their own will. The long, thin, red marks on the man's back are from the whip—the whip that Uri is holding. Those are the marks of envy and betrayal—a betrayal so deep, so bitter, it is making a hole into my chest.

Uri growls—such a hot sound. I can read eagerness and bliss in the tense lines of his jaw and shoulders, not for me but for *him*.

What did I expect? This is a sex club. And Uri likes to make people suffer. Why didn't I ever connect the dots? He doesn't find me disgusting. He simply doesn't want to give it to me, but this guy, he looks like a regular for Uri's attention.

I focus on him again and the pleasure filling his features. Ones so similar to mine. Did I remind Uri of him? It's crazy, but when I saw them at first, I thought he stole from me when perhaps I took something that was his. Uri just took pity on me because I was high, and then again when I was shaken up because of the stalker. I made all the rest up.

Can a heart shatter this quietly? Because mine has just exploded, but I can't hear a single sound.

It's like the carpet was yanked from under my feet, and I'm lost in the dreadful expanse of this club. The strangled noise leaving my lips echoes into the gallery. It makes Uri slowly turn toward the glass wall where I am. For the first time in my life, I feel disgusted by the thought of him near me. Looking at me. Touching me.

An overwhelming impulse to flee the room engulfs me, and I yield to it. I turn and once again run away. There's a funny ringing in my ears, and I have to stop for a moment to lean against the black wall and take a deep breath. My vision turns blurry, and I feel cold even though my heart is racing. Everything feels fictitious, disjointed. It shakes me down to my soul.

The number seven on the door in front of me comes into sharp focus, and I remember the words of the nice guy at the bar. Was it room seven?

I hear heavy footsteps coming my way and a bellowing voice. Gritting my teeth, I turn the handle and get inside the room, quickly closing the door behind me. I don't know if it was Uri or if he saw me in the gallery, but I saw him, and I wish I didn't.

"Hello." A male voice makes me spin around with a gasp.

It's not the nice guy. It's the other one. The one who hit on me after I sat down at the bar. He's sitting on a chaise lounge with a glass in his hand. Is he alone? I don't see anybody else in the room.

"Changed your mind? This must be my lucky night." He smiles too smugly. Annoyingly so. But that dark, confident stare, I think it can help me right now.

"Can you really make me forget?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely." He slowly straightens and stands up like a panther ready to pounce. "If you are into certain kinks." He takes a sip from his glass before adding, "The submissive kind." His teeth shine under the rose lights.

"Sounds good," I hear myself reply.

If he dominates me, I'll become helpless, thoughtless. I won't keep replaying that awful scene over and over in my head. In front of my eyes.

I see a sink on the right and go wash my face and mouth.

"No sex," I tell him as I dry my hands.

"How can I not oblige? But know that I'd be willing if you reconsider," he clarifies. "Safe word?"

I know what he's talking about, and I don't need to think too hard. "Four."

"Four. Alright. Take off your clothes, leave the underwear on."

Uri's familiar scent washes over my senses as I remove my sweater and shirt, but the memory of him with that guy makes me move faster. My mind

is reeling.

Am I really doing this?

“Red lace. Nice. Kneel on the bed. Arms out.” As I do what he orders, I notice he took the robe he was wearing off, and now he’s only in his blue silk boxers.

He ties my hand to the bed’s headboard tight enough to hurt. It feels good and off at the same time.

His thumb brushes over the number four burned on my inner wrist. “A lucky number, perhaps?” he asks me, still sporting that wolfish smile.

“The opposite,” I mutter.

His low whisper reaches my left ear. “You’re about to experience paradise.” Something cold brushes my back. It’s smooth and flat. “Just do what I fucking say.”

His voice feels wrong. Bile is coming up my throat again, but I stay put. I need this. Need to erase Uri from my head.

“Give me the pain,” I let out between gritted teeth.

“As you wish.” I can hear the delight in his tone.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Twenty-two years ago

*Project: Blood Assassin*

*Subject: Seven*

*Day 700*

*Time 18:03*

*Subject Seven's experiment is showing promise.*

*Pain seems to amuse the Subject. Inflicting it, not receiving it.*

*One of the guards entered Seven's cell today to give him his daily corporal beating. The electric rod was defective, and the Subject took advantage of the situation, using a loose brick to hit the guard in the head. Then Seven proceeded to zap him in the face, stomach, and groin. The satisfied smile and eagerness in the Subject's eyes were proof enough of Seven's deep gratification in causing the guard's suffering. We can trigger more events in the future and decide from there how to proceed.*

*The Subject is also an innate manipulator. Seven has a good read on people, using their weaknesses against them. It could be troublesome, but I believe we can turn it to our advantage with some extra coercion.*

*What is concerning is Seven's impulsiveness, stubbornness, and rebellious behavior, which are all prolonging some phases of the experiment. We need to find a better way to subdue the Subject.*

*So many interesting possibilities to explore and force on him.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

# *nine*

URIEL

I leave the room cursing under my breath. My dick remains soft inside my pants. Tonight, I came to the club with one thought inside my head: release. I quickly found a person interested in my sadistic scene, and I went at it as usual. I tied the person up, gagged them, and started to deliver some pain. It usually turns me hard as a rock—the muffled cries, the shivering body, the teary eyes begging for more while red marks appear on their skin.

Tonight I just couldn’t enjoy it. Not even a little. Because the person bent in front of me wasn’t Sari. It was a fraud, a pathetic impostor. Now I know what the real deal feels like, against me, crying my name, with his soft, smooth skin waking all sorts of dark intentions.

All the meaningless, faceless encounters I had in the past became a senseless blur. I got off, they got off, but I wasn’t really present in the moment. Sari’s sweet face was the one I always saw as I chose them and gave them pain, and when I felt really pent up, railed them. They were all pitiful imitations.

But tonight I couldn’t go along with the pretense anymore. I know how fragile the slender line of his neck is, how delicate the curves of his hips feel, the exact red shade his skin turns when I touch him, the softness of his long hair between my fingers, the plumpness of his ass in my hands.

My cock twitches, and I feel a tingle under my restless fingers imagining Sari restrained and screaming under my hands.

“Argh!” I let out an angry growl as I walk barefoot to the main room again.

As soon as the manager sees me, he hurries my way. Fuck!

“Mr. M.,” he addresses me in a whisper. “Your pet—”

“Not my fucking pet.” I signal the bartender, and he nods, already knowing my usual.

“The…person who was with you in room three came to us to complain.” He looks down at the tablet in his hand. “He claims you released him a few minutes after starting your session and stopped without an explanation.”

“And?” I left my gun in the trunk of the Land Rover. Two minutes to reach the underground garage. Two more to get back and paint the floor with this fucker’s brain matter. I finally get a boner tonight from the mental image.

“Well, this is not the way we do things at Madame Claudette’s,” he affirms with a haughty tone. He’s a fucking ass.

“I didn’t fucking break any rules. One of BDSM’s consent rules states that either of the partners can stop a scene at any point.” I grab the glass of bourbon and take a couple of sips before adding, “I’m sure he’ll find another dom very easily—owner or whatever the fuck you call it.” He came to me all flirty and shit, clearly had a lot of experience, knew exactly what he wanted and what his limits were.

“Even so, upsetting a client like this is not very smart.” *And upsetting me is?*

I fucking hate this weasel. All he does is lick asses and order the staff around.

“Listen very carefully,” I snarl, getting nose to nose with him. “I own half of this fucking club plus 1 percent, which means I have the power to fire whoever the fuck I want. Right now, I think you’re unnecessary to the profitability of this establishment.”

The realization and then the deep fear filling his eyes already makes me want to keep him just to fuck with him.

“You have thirty seconds to change my mind. Starting now.” I move back to grab my bourbon.

He’s panting, all red in the face, eyes frantically flickering. “You-your guest, he-he arrived fifteen minutes ago or so. I wasn’t notified in advance, but I-I let him in anyway, since you are—”

“What guest?” I ask in a bored tone.

“Bear-Stone,” he replies quickly.

“Raphael?” He is a member, not a guest.

“N-no.” He looks down at his tablet. “A Sariel Bear-Stone.”

“What?” I slowly growl out. An eerie feeling crawls down my body as every muscle in me tenses. I abruptly grab the manager’s stiff shirt and snap, “Where the fuck is he?”

The manager shivers with terror as the bartender answers for him, “He went toward the rooms, alone.”

“Which room?” I snarl at the manager. There’s no cameras inside the rooms, but there are three in the corridor. I swear to God if someone touched him, I’ll cut off all their fingers and make them eat each one.

The manager checks his damn tablet again, lifting it in the air on the left as I’m still gripping the front of his shirt. Finally he gasps a seven.

I know who usually books that room. The fucker Madame Claudette almost kicked out after he went down too heavily on his partner. He was here before. I saw him. Motherfucking shit!

I shove the manager away and rush toward the corridor. Sari’s body belongs to me. He might be sauntering around with it, but it’s mine. And I’ll turn that body into one that can’t feel anything unless he’s with me.

I finally reach room seven, and keeping my foot flat, I give a hard kick just above the wooden door knob. As the door bangs open, I storm inside, and

what I find turns my blood cold.

Sari is on his knees and elbows on a bed, body trembling, wrists tied up, wearing only a lace bra and matching thong. His left ass cheek is red, and his lower lip is split, a bruise forming on his chin. His braid is half loose, and the mix of pleasure, fear, and sorrow in his teary eyes is instantly replaced with shock as soon as his gaze focuses on me. It guts me.

“What the fuck?” I hear an annoyed voice.

My gaze fixes on the dead man holding a wooden paddle, his arm outstretched over his head, ready to strike again what’s mine. I can clearly see the hard bulge tenting his silk underwear as he glares at me. It thwarts the chill inside, making my insides boil with rage and very malicious needs.

“Get the fuck out! We are getting to the good part here.”

The edges of my vision turn red. Blood red. Sanguine. He signed his death certificate the moment he touched my Baby Blue.

First, I sock him in the left cheek, dislocating his jaw, and employ an elbow block as he attempts to hit me with the wooden paddle. I yank it out of his hand and shoot it straight at his throat, bruising his vocal cords and stopping the screaming. I crack three of his ribs with a knee hit and block his pathetic left hook by grabbing his swinging wrist. Then I place his left hand flat on the table and swing the paddle down on it over and over, relishing the sharp sounds of bones breaking.

I raise my elbow and get him right in the nose, fracturing it. The blood that starts dripping down his chin doesn’t stop me. I drop the paddle and use my fist to beat his face. I no longer see the cockroach in front of me, only my vengeance. Thinking of him making Sari cry, giving him pain, giving him pleasure, stealing moments from me, more first times that should have been mine. All mine.

My homicidal behavior is fucking justified. My bloody knuckles wrap around the cockroach’s neck, and I slide him up the wall.

“Let him go.” I grit my teeth at the familiar, trembling voice.

“Uri, put him down before you kill him.” Sari tries again, his words less shaky.

I tighten my fingers around the cockroach’s throat instead, enjoying every single gasp and wheeze as his face starts turning red.

I shift my eyes toward Sari. They fall on his busted lip. “No one makes you bleed but me. Only. Me,” I growl menacingly.

His little Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, tears rolling down his cheeks. “Uri, there’re eyes on us. Please, let go.”

In my peripheral vision, I see the manager with one of the guards stopping on the room’s threshold, shock and horror painted on his face at the sight of the bloody mess I turned the cockroach into.

Fucking fuck! I hate to be interrupted when I’m about to off someone. It deeply vexes me, like ants crawling under my skin. But I can’t get caught killing; I already lived in a cell and don’t want to experience that ever again. Nor do I want to leave Sari unprotected.

So I lean down to the cockroach’s ear and whisper, “This is not a goodbye, but a see you later.” I reluctantly pull my right arm back and release him from my grip. I don’t watch his body drop to the floor, but I turn toward Sari, and after pulling half of the sheet off the bed, I shield his body from the other men’s eyes.

“Throw this fucking piece of shit out!” I tell the guard. He looks at the manager, who sends a look Sari’s way, noticing the bruise and blood on his mouth.

“Do what he says,” the manager orders, giving me a nod as the burly guard lifts the unconscious man over his shoulder and leaves. “What do you want me to do with him?” he asks me. Does he finally understand his place?

“Throw him on the street.” I’ll deal with him later. I’m sure Rami will find other people he hurt in his past. Not that it matters. I’ve already got the green light to get rid of him.

“I’m immensely sorry about what happened.” The manager is addressing Sari, looking all obsequious and apologetic. “Whatever you need, please—”

I cut him off. “I’ll take care of him. OUT!” I snap.

He jumps back; wide-eyed and looking like a bobblehead doll, he nods as he hurriedly exits the room. It takes him three tries to close the door—since I broke the lock when I busted it open— but somehow, he manages in the end.

I take a step closer to the bed. Sari scrambles back, away from me; the rope still restraining him pulls at his wrists, halting his movements and stealing a hiss out of his lips.

He always looked at me with warmth in his aquamarine gaze. There’s no trace of it now, only sorrow and anger—so much anger. Still, his doesn’t match the depth of my fury. There’s a clear message in those pools that says, *don’t come near me.*

“The fuck I won’t,” I mutter, taking hold of his arms to quickly untie him. He turns stiff but lets me do it without a word. The instinct to protect him overpowers any other desire. The sight of the chaffed skin around his wrists makes me want to find that fucking shithead and twist his neck until his head is detached from the rest of his body. The stark red lines of the number four brand—the one the scientists burned on his inner wrist—is in the exact same place as mine. Our subject numbers. Seven and Four.

I move to the sink to dampen a towel, then I look for the ointment provided in every room and find it in the bowl on the table. I sit on the bed and start delicately rubbing his flesh with the towel, moving aside the black bracelet from his wrist. I’ll keep my phone close at all times from now on, Sari’s racing heartbeat would have triggered the app on my cell and I would’ve stopped that fucker earlier.

He gasps and instantly pulls his hand away, but my hold is strong and I don’t let go as I keep cleaning the wounds. There’s blood on his delicate skin, like Sari fought against the rope to get free.

“I’m an idiot,” he whispers brokenly after a while.

“Compared to you, most of the world is stupid. You need to be more specific, Baby Blue,“ I say between my gritted teeth as I finish applying the ointment.

“Stop, just stop!” He bats my hands away. “Why do you keep doing this? Playing with me?”

“Playing?” I echo.

“Stringing me along, when what you really want is someone else!” he clips.

“There’s only fucking you in my world, Sari. Nobody else.”

He looks down for a moment. “I saw you!” He swallows hard and then fixes his pained eyes on me. “I saw you with that guy.” His gaze turns watery again, and fuck, there’s too much space between us.

“He was just a tool; I used him and discarded him.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” He stands up, keeping the sheet around his body. “What if I use tools as well, Uri? What then?”

I growl long and deep. “I’ll end them, just like I’m going to do with that fucker who thought he could put his hands on you.”

“Talk about a double standard.” I don’t understand the betrayal pouring from his voice. “And I asked that *fucker* to touch me.”

I grunt. “Did you ask him to use a paddle as well? Or to split your lip and bruise your face?” I snarl; my rage tries to overwhelm me again.

“Obviously not!” he cries out. “I always choose the wrong guy, don’t I?”

“Because I am the one for you.”

“Right!” he exclaims sarcastically. “If that’s true, why are you fucking other people then? Why won’t you use that whip on me? Why don’t you want *me* to touch you?” he screams, blurry eyes wide and wet, cheeks red. He’s so fucking beautiful. The sight of him so broken and desperate turns my dick to stone.

When I don’t answer, he shakes his head. “Get out.” I can barely hear his soft whisper.

“Look at me,” I order him, and fuck he does instantly, turning the fire inside me into a blazing inferno. I grab the back of my shirt and pull it off slowly, showing my chest and biceps to him for the first time since I was seventeen.

His eyes move all over my torso, looking at the ink covering it. It's all Sari. Memories I share with him, places, names, and dates. Baby Blue Eyes envelop one pec, moving up the shoulder and down the bicep. The day, month, and year I first saw him is tattooed among the flowers on my heart in red, bold numbers. On the other side, there's a microscope, a slice of apple pie, some titles of his favorite books, a pomegranate, the green bicycle he rode when we were kids, a quote from his favorite song.

I have more on my legs and back, more things that remind me of him. Always him.

His arm reaches out. His trembling finger almost makes contact with the tattoo of his teary eyes on my belly. But don't. He wraps it around his body while his confused gaze keeps studying me with shock and appreciation. My cock is throbbing inside my pants, begging for some relief.

"They are all about…"

"…you," I finish for him.

He blinks a few times, looking even more confused, then suddenly frowns. "What are those small lines tattooed all around your bicep?"

"One for every research project you completed," I let him know. There are twenty-three in total.

His hand shoots up to cover his mouth. "Why?" I think I hear him ask.

"I got a tattoo each time I almost took you. The flashes of possessiveness overwhelmed me to the point of possessing you." I give him a look filled with raw desire, so as not to have any more misunderstandings. "Ironically, the pain reminded me why I couldn't do it." Instead of hurting him, I hurt myself.

His arms tighten around his waist. "I don't understand," he says in a small voice, mouth trembling.

"I'm a sadist, Sari." I pause to let the word sink into his brain. "I enjoy hurting people."

"I know."

I nod. “I’m not only talking about donors. I get hard thinking about a writhing body in the throes of pain and pleasure, confused pleading, high-pitched cries, reddened skin and jiggling flesh. And you, Baby Blue, are the main character every single time. The way I want you is rough and forceful. I want to dominate you and punish you, see your body shiver, jolt, scream under my hands.”

As I talk, I see Sari’s body quivering. There’s no fear in his half-lidded eyes. He’s struggling to catch his breath as his face blooms with a deep flush. His big eyes remain on mine, they never waiver. I don’t let them.

The sheet falls on the floor, revealing his lean body covered only in sexy lingerie as his cold hands flatten on my bare chest. The unexpected touch ignites an ache inside me, the all-consuming, craving kind.

“So why didn’t you?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I don’t want to hurt you.” My fingers land on his soft ass, gently cupping each cheek. They fit so fucking perfectly in my hands.

“You-you just said you’re a sadist and that the idea of hurting me turns you on.”

“Yeah, and you told me how you suffered unthinkable physical and mental pain every day we were imprisoned. How it almost…pushed you to take your own life. I would rather eviscerate myself with my own hands than do something that will make you leave me…forever.”

“Oh my God.” His forehead falls on my chest. His warmth breaths brush my heated skin. “You are the sweetest idiot. That was before.”

“Before what?” I grab his hips as he looks up at me again—I can span his waist with my hands.

“Before I discovered how—” He stops, inhaling a large gulp of air. “I have an emptiness so dark inside me, it needs to be filled.”

“With?” Does he actually need to kill like the rest of us?

“Pain.” A tremulous smile appears on his lips.

“Pain,” I echo, squeezing his flesh with my hands, hard. *Fucking. Hell. This can’t be.*

He moans like a fucking bitch in heat, his eyes hazing over. *But it is.*

“When we were saved, I didn’t want to feel anything. I was a scared empty shell, irremediably cracked and on the verge of breaking.”

I nod, remembering his void stare, while his small hands rub over my chest.

“Our family and you helped me overcome that. But something was just not right. Something was missing. And as I grew up, I started to understand what. They say things get better with time, but that’s not necessarily true. After experiencing that much pain, everything can’t ever become perfectly alright, because every time I looked back to it, I felt the same hurt and hopelessness all over again. The ugliness inside me, the one that the scientists fed, making it grow, was still there, and the only way to cope with it was to keep feeding it, but on my terms. And being pinned down, roughed up, punished, and forced to take it…arouses me.”

Fuck! I know he’s telling the truth. I can feel his lace-clad dick straining against my leg.

“All these years, and you didn’t tell me what you really needed,” I hiss angrily. “I’m not the only one keeping secrets.”

“You never looked at me that way. I was your special little brother, to protect and keep safe. Weak.”

“You are not my fucking brother. I told you the first time I saw you in that blue field what you are…mine. And do you know why, Sari?”

He shakes his head hesitantly.

“You don’t take the need for violence and blood away from me—nobody does. But you create another urge, a stronger one, that overshadows it.”

Sari’s turquoise pools brim with tears as he lets out a surprised chuckle. Then he pulls my head down and his lips meet mine.

He tastes like blissful surrender and passionate audacity. Sucking my tongue and nipping at my mouth before yielding all the control to me. His

eagerness for me is everything I've ever imagined. Also pliable, submissive, and a total slut for me—rubbing his dick against my leg as I get a good grip on his ass. He hisses when I tighten my hand on his left cheek, which reminds me of his abused skin and that damn fucker who had the audacity to hurt him.

I can taste his blood on my tongue, coppery and so damn sweet—bitter as well since I wasn't the one to break his skin. But I will next time. I'll bite and go deep, leaving a permanent mark there. Everywhere.

Eventually, I pull away and watch as his eyes slowly open. He looks drunk and hazy. I stroke his puffy lips with my thumb, slick from our mixed saliva.

"What should I do with you now, Baby Blue?" I rumble, giving his right ass cheek a hard squeeze.

"Fill me up with it," he murmurs, so fucking sexily.

"With what? Pain or pleasure?" I ask, giving the split on his lip a long, slow lick.

He gasps. "Both."

I grab his hair and pull his head back, tightening my fingers just to give him a little sting. His eyes roll inside his head. He's so damn sensitive, how did I not see this before?

"You want me to hurt you, Sari? To abuse all your holes? The pain will be so fucking sweet, you'll never be able to live without it. Without me." He shudders, and I decide to give him more. "I will fucking destroy you. And won't stop there. I'll keep railing you after you pass out. You'll wake up with me still pumping inside your loose, wet hole, pinned down, covered in my marks, trembling with another orgasm."

His legs give out, but I don't let him fall. Never will. I keep his body against mine as I move us to the bed. I sit on the mattress and shift him until he's belly down astride on my lap. I search over the table close by until I find what I'm looking for. I take it out of the package and leave it on the mattress for now.

“You know I need to punish you, Baby Blue,” I tell him, letting my fingers trail up his perfectly shaped thighs, forming circles on the sensitive skin of his rear. “I know what you want. What you need. I know now. But you can stop me anytime.”

My words make him clench those round cheeks over and over, and I part them to give his little pucker a first look. Fucking hell, I’m going to fuck this ass so hard, it will never be the same ever again.

My hand lifts and then comes down hard, making his ass cheek jiggle, the right one—the left is still bright red. A burning sensation spreads across my palm while my handprint appears on his skin, covering the whole cheek. The perfect size. Sari emits an indefinable sound filled with twisted desire and uncontrollable lust.

“Just a smack, and I have you dripping on my leg. You’re so fucking responsive,” I rumble, dropping my hand down on his flesh again. I’m spanking my Sari, and he’s fucking begging for it. The wicked smirk on my face turns devilish.

“You won’t ever keep anything else from me. I want to know every tainted, impure thought passing through your mind.” I squeeze the heated flesh.

“Yes!” he cries out, pushing his sexy ass more firmly against my hand. “It burns…I love it. Your hand…more.”

“Turn your face toward the mirror on the wall.” He does so without waiting for an explanation, too eager for more. Our reflection is right there for him to see and I want him to see.

I don’t soothe him or give him words of encouragement. What I give him is another hard smack, followed by a third, a fourth, and a fifth crack, all on the same area. His lips are parted, letting slip small whimpering sounds; his eyes are watering, locks falling down like dark waterfalls, hands fisting the sheets.

“Count for me. If you make it to six, I’ll reward you.” I’ve never felt the need to reward one of those faceless fucks. I inflicted pain, and then if I felt like it, I chased ecstasy using one of their holes. A means to an end, nothing

more. But with Sari, I want to take my time and relish every single fucking hot-blooded moment.

Another smack. Every inch of his skin is exposed to my touch. Mine to do with whatever the fuck I please.

The silence tells me he's already drunk on pain. I slap his thigh. "Why aren't you counting?"

"O-one," he stutters. Our reflection in the mirror is making my cock weep. My heavily tattooed torso is such a contrast to his alabaster lines. He's a fascinating blend of delicate and masculine. His long, androgynous body draped over my strong legs, covered only in those flimsy scraps of lace. There's something about the piece of translucent fabric that sends a burning hot chisel straight to my heavy balls.

I know he has more at home in his drawer. I've seen them. Thigh highs, garters, babydolls, and bras of thin fabrics so erotic, I couldn't help but imagine topping a slutty Sari while holding his ass cheeks open as he begs for dick. I grab the edge of the thong and pull on it, making the thin strip of fabric between his cheeks rub against his sensitive pucker.

"Mmm. It hurts so good," he moans, trying to move his hips. His eyes look cloudy, his back tense with anticipation, as if he's utterly focused on my hands and the bliss they are giving him.

"Keep going," I demand, just before another crack resounds in the room.

"Two. Ahhhh! Three-ee, four, f-five."

"My marks on you get you all riled up, eh, Sari?" I tease him.

I grab the butt plug I left on the bed and twist the head, turning the vibration on. I trail it down his nape, his shoulders jerk at the sensation.

"Six," he continues, moaning as I move the small vibrator further down the long, perfect curve of his spine, tracing the edge of his slutty thong. He's visibly shaking on my lap, and when I spank him again, he jumps and cries.

I pour a generous amount of lube on the plug, and after moving the thin strip of fabric aside, I push it against his entrance. "Here is your reward," I

whisper darkly.

He pants as I keep rubbing the vibrating plug against his hole. I can see he's already on the verge of coming, writhing and squirming, trying to push the anal toy inside.

"Please." Fuck, he begs so damn perfectly.

I grab his left ass cheek to better witness the moment his hole spreads open and gobbles the plug right up. *Damn, what a sight.*

He lets out another scream, and then another when I land my hand right on his hole pushing the toy further in.

"How does it feel?" My voice sounds hoarse. I'm so damn horny.

"W-weird," he cries out.

I chuckle darkly, wrapping a hand around his nape to hold him still. "Are you sure? The moaning mouth on your face and the greedy, hungry one down here are both telling the same story."

I lick my palm and press it against Sari's hole. I flex it and relax it, creating a suction around it like a vacuum that moves the vibrating toy inside him. He pumps his hips as I up the tempo. A growl leaves my throat, and I tighten my grip around his neck.

"Feel your belly coiling? Everything in your body tightening?" There is tension in my voice. I want to fuck him badly. "You like being dominated by me, like the pain I give you. Do you know why? It's because you belong to me." I smack his hole.

He yelps a "yes," rubbing his dick on my lap while his hole is clenching hard around the toy inside him. I slip two fingers in, groaning at the feel of his warm insides squeezing me so tightly. I touch the vibrator, dragging it up and down as my fingers start fucking inside him. His back bows while more wetness leaks on my pants.

"More," he pleads, opening his legs a little wider.

"That's right, spread those thighs and show me that tight hole. Fuck, yes," I drawl. "And don't forget to count." I pull out my fingers and *smack, smack,*

*smack*.

“Uri!” He screams my name so beautifully. Three fingers slide in without any resistance. He’s fucking ready.

“If you keep pressing there, I’ll…” Sari can’t finish his sentence as his body starts convulsing.

“Look how hard you’re coming, just from getting your hole finger fucked.” I’m watching his reflection as I continue hitting his prostate, pushing the toy against it. His soft, lovely features are contorted in pleasure, jaw dropped and lips parted on a silent scream, brow furrowed, nails clawing the sheet. My hand looks good around his fragile throat.

“I’m sorry,” he utters in a raspy voice once his body calms down.

“Just tell me nobody else has made you come like this.” My tone is possessive and slightly threatening.

“Nobody. I’ve never let… Ahhhh!” He screams as I pull my fingers and the plug out. His hole looks wet and fucked out. Absolutely mine.

“Next time, I’ll leave the plug in while I rail you.” Sari must like the thought, judging by his loud gasp. “But for our first time I just want you to feel me. I’m the first one, am I not?” I made my voice dark and threatening. Because if I am not—

“Yes!” His eyes find mine in the mirror. Such an open, eager gaze.

My hand moves over the marks left by the paddle. I wish I could erase them, carve the red skin right off. “Nobody else fucking touches you from now on. Am I clear?”

I pull him up, holding onto his neck, and twist him until he’s sitting on top of me, legs spread over both of my thighs. His back to my front. His hands land on my knees like he’s afraid to fall. I’ll never let it happen. Never let him go.

A deep groan comes out of me at the sight of him all spread out for me in the large mirror. I can see his hard nipples through the translucent fabric of his bra—metal clamps would look so pretty pinching those succulent buds.

So many things I want to do to him, and all the time in the world to do them.

My nose nuzzles his hair, taking in his sugary apple and honey scent. It's intoxicating. I push his hips slightly forward to undo my pants and release my aching dick, the Jacob's ladder extending from the bottom to the top. I still remember the awestruck look on Sari's face the first time he saw it in my car. Filled with filthy thoughts and need.

"You look so fucking pretty with my handprints all over your body." I bite him hard on the neck, enjoying his sudden moan. Then I push a finger inside his mouth as I force his face toward the mirror.

He's sucking on my digit like a starving animal. Damn, that's hot. I need to fuck this ass.

"I want you to keep looking as I take you. I want those bedroom eyes on my dick sliding inside you."

His nails dig into my skin, and a thick, juicy stream drips from the head of his hard cock. I rip the side of his thong, the torn lace collapses on one thigh. I grab him under both his thighs and lift his body up, lining my dick with his entrance.

"Spread those cheeks for me." And shit, he does. His hands move back, and as soon as I get a look at his pucker, I spit twice, savoring the sight of my saliva rolling down on his crack. I smirk. It gives me a sense of ownership, of control over him.

"Now your twitching hole is going to get my raw dick and swallow it whole. Your insides will take the entire shape of me." I murmur almost ominously near his ear, enjoying the shudder overcoming his body. I'm clean, I get tested regularly and never fucked without protection. I'd never put Sari in danger.

I groan as I press in slowly, little by little impaling Sari on my bare cock. The fat head slips in, and the slurping sound mixed with the sudden pressure makes me rumble, "I'm going to blow my first load as soon as I bottom out; do you know why?" Christ, he's so fucking tight, he's strangling my dick, milking it so damn good. "Your virgin hole will get its

first taste of my seed and never forget. Never fucking want another cock ever."

"It burns." He moans and whimpers with a rapturous smile on his lips.

"Just a couple more inches, Baby Blue." I sound like I'm in pain as well. And I am, waiting impatiently to reach his core to unload my balls.

"I'm so full."

"You have a nine-inch, pierced dick currently spearing your insides," I say in a rough, forceful voice.

His gaze—there is so much in his eyes, an intoxicating blend of desire and want, fixed on us. It makes me lose it. I thrust upward, completely impaling him with every inch I have. His head falls back as he cries out.

Even though it's his first time, his hole is a cock-loving slut clamping down on me. I growl as I close my teeth over his shoulder and bite down hard.

"Uri." My name whispered so brokenly as I finally get balls deep inside him forces the cum out. I hold him down as I grind my spurting dick deep inside. A loud grunt is ripped from my chest. *Fucking finally take my cream!*

I've been pulling him in all this time, and now that we are carnally connected, he finally feels like a part of me.

"Swirl those hips. Get used to the feel of a hard cock inside you. Fuck, like that." I pull on his nipple and pinch the stiff bud digging my nails in through the lace. Small ropes of jizz keep shooting from my slit, soaking him from the inside. I keep groaning as he works my dick like a pro.

He feels so fucking slippery inside, all stuffed with my cum. I can't stop grunting. With his misty eyes laser-focused on where our bodies are connected, he hooks his arms behind my head, stretching his torso and taking my still hard cock deeper. *He was fucking born to take cock, to take me.*

"From now on, I'll fill you first and then pump my dick through it until I cream you again."

“Whatever you want. Just…I need you!” His words force a roar out of my mouth. Those desperate tears rolling down his pale cheeks, they get me so fucking hard. I want to see him cry every time I fuck him.

I ease out of him slowly, still stiff and eager, before slamming back in hard. I want to make sure he feels me every time he breathes for the rest of our lives. He pulls on my dreads as the rhythm of my thrusts speeds up. I’m fucking into him, my hips lifting him high, bouncing him on my cock, my gaze hot on his ass as it rebounds and shakes. What a beauty. His hole is so tight and inviting. The slide of my piercing stroking inside his clenching channel is the most intense thing I’ve ever experienced.

I’m going to do this every day, no exception.

His fucked-up erotic noises turn something on inside me—a dark hunger. It urges me to smack his ass, both cheeks hard and fast not caring about anything but hearing his strangled gasps and high-pitched whimpers and feeling the way he arches his back and tightens up around my cock.

“You should have told me you were into this shit sooner, Sari.” I pull his hair back and suck voraciously on his neck. He draws in a short breath, his red dick jolting with every drive of my hips, leaking profusely over his flat belly.

My balls are boiling once again. He’s so fucking wet and hot inside, my cock is melting. I like the flush across the back of his neck and the way his body feels both firm and soft, the tremble in his voice as he begs me to hurt him more. Those plump, reddened cheeks jiggling as I pound him…damn!

“Look at this, all stretched, taking my dick.” I spit on my shaft and watch it, all slick and shiny, disappear inside him again. Fuck. What a view. I grab his waist with both hands and go to town on his ass.

All Sari can do is take it as I piston in and out of him, each stroke deeper than the last, almost as if I’m trying to reach his stomach.

“God, yes,” he slurs.

*How beautifully he breaks under me.*

“Every fucking day. Every day, this hole is going to be used and filled,” I promise him, and he answers with a lusty moan.

I grab his dick and start beating it off. He tenses on top of me. His insides clench, and he shudders violently against me as his cum covers my hand and his chest.

“Yes, that’s it. Enjoy your first time coming on my big cock.”

I turn his face to the side and swallow his slutty moans with my lips and tongue. I lift my fingers covered in his cum and slick our lips before kissing him again. His intimate taste fills my mouth as I share it with him, and damn it’s luscious.

Soon he turns limp in my arms, eyes closed, mouth open, still clamping down on me every time I drive leisurely inside.

“Open those beautiful turquoise eyes,” I tell him, grunting when he does. There’s so much languidness and blissful contentment in there.

I slide my hand over his torso, brushing a point over his bellybutton. “The head of my cock is reaching right here.” I press down to intensify the sensation, earning a broken whimper in response. He laces his fingers with mine, pushing them more firmly over his belly where my dick is slowly pumping. I’m watching us, hypnotized, feeling even more tethered to him now.

He turns his small, straight nose into my neck while rotating his hips on my dick. “Want to feel you deeper,” he whispers against my skin.

I need him under me. Now.

Slowly, I pull him off me and unceremoniously toss him on the bed. His surprised squeak makes me smile as I move on top of him, and without any warning, I push myself deep, all the way inside him again.

I lift his arms over his head and keep his wrists down with one hand—careful not to touch the wounds there. My other hand moves to his bra; I yank at the strap, tearing it, and pull it down until I have his nipple on display. The sight of his star-shaped birthmark makes me smile. My fingers

brush over it before pinching and twisting the nipple as I grind my cock in him, pinning him down from the inside.

He wraps his legs around me, aquamarine eyes lost in mine, moans reaching the ceiling. That's when I start to thrust, hard.

"Your darkness was made to match mine." I spit on his nipple, and then pull on the stiff, slick nub. "My cock was made for this hole. I know you're fucking addicted to it already. The wet sound your slutty hole makes speaks for itself," I grunt as I pound him into the mattress.

I can feel every inch of his body, his blazing insides, the trembling of his thighs around me, the ribs that show slightly whenever he breathes, his small nipples stroking my chest—so pale in color. It's like he's enveloping me whole with his erotic moans, warm body, and that sexy-as-fuck movement of his waist. He's making me want him so badly. I want my scent to absorb and soak deep inside him, to his core and mark him for all eternity.

He's pressing back into me, heels digging into my ass, and with the angle I'm nailing him at, I'm putting pressure right on his prostate.

"You look so beautiful when you're getting fucked. Don't you dare tell anyone your asshole is this fucking tight, not if you want them to live." The thought of confining him somewhere in order to possess him crosses my mind—like it has multiple times before. I don't care about our family. Our bros will understand my obsession since they have all found someone.

His mouth suddenly closes over mine, his hungry tongue pushing its way in. I respond so fiercely, I take his breath away, pushing him to the brink over and over beyond his point of resistance. When I bring him to tears and feel him squeezing around me as his cum splashes between us, I know it's my time to let go for real now.

I release his wrists to grab the hair on the top of his head in a dominating grip. "Do you feel me raw, rubbing against your insides?"

When he doesn't answer, I slap his red nipple and sink my nail there. He sobs a "yes," and I turn fucking feral, ramming into his hole with abandon.

“Want to send my cum to the furthest place, where nobody but me will ever reach.” Sheer dominance loops through every harshly spoken word.

He clings to my shoulders, bringing his sweaty forehead flush with mine. “Come, Uri,” he begs. “I want you to really make me yours.”

With a grunt, I slam home and unload deep in his ass. My cock twitches and throbs as I look straight into his eyes and let out all the ecstasy he’s making me feel. I’m enveloped in bottomless ecstasy. This is by far the best sex I have ever had in my life.

When my eyes are able to focus again, Sari is all they see. His blush-tinted cheeks, the way his long dark locks frame his cheekbones, making them more pronounced, brushing his clear-cut, pixie jawline, the puffy mouth stretched in a captivated smile.

My lips brush his temple as I take in his sweet scent mixed with sex and me. I growl possessively because, fuck, that feels so damn good.

“If you spill even a drop of my cum, I’ll punish you,” I tell him with a gravelly voice.

He nods even though his eyelids are drooping, the smile on his face slowly disappearing. My name the last thing he utters.

He falls asleep with my cock inside him. The realization makes me smirk. I stare at Sari’s sleeping form for a moment. Fucking him once wasn’t enough. Burying my face in his hair, I hold him tighter against me and start pumping my cock into his well-used, drenched hole. There’s less urgency this time. I just want to feel him around me.

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# *ten*

SARIEL

When I wake up, it’s still dark outside. Did I pass out? I’m in Uri’s lake house, in his bedroom. I feel deliciously sore and very well used. And covered in cum. There’s a musky, sweaty smell in the air mixed with Uri’s.

Has he been fucking me all this time? The thought of him doing debauched things to me while I was asleep makes me shiver with desire and annoyance. I want to remember all the pain and pleasure he gives me, but at the same time, being used when in a vulnerable position like that makes me feel all tingly. It’s insane what I’ve become and how compatible we are.

The bathroom door opens, and when I blink, Uri is at the foot of the bed.

“Baby Blue,” he says, his voice dropping, snaring all my focus. His gaze is so intense, I can’t take my eyes off it. His attention always feels intoxicating, like I’m the only other person in the room—which I am right now. I wet my lips, my helpless heart hammering in my chest.

Without moving his eyes from my face, he lies on the bed right on top of me—holding his weight on his elbows. Is he gauging my reaction? Like I’d ever say no to him.

His mouth lowers to my neck, and he starts trailing open-mouthed kisses down to my shoulder, where he sucks a mark into my skin. The twinge caused by the suction makes pre-cum form on the tip of my incredibly hard dick.

“I want to sink my teeth into your firm, round, perfect peach of an ass.” Is he asking for my permission? That’s sweet, and so unlike him.

“Cover me in bites. Do whatever you want to me.”

His light brown pools darken as he studies me for a moment. Then he slides down and flips me, doing exactly that. I hiss as he continues to use his teeth on my meaty flesh. He sucks a bruise there too, and another. He makes a trail of them over both my ass cheeks until he stops between them.

“I want to see.” As soon as the words leave my mouth I’m rolled belly up again and my knees and my legs are pushed toward my chest, exposing my hole to him. My hands are moved to replace his and hold my legs up. His head shifts back between my thighs until his lips are an inch from my entrance, warm puffs of air fanning over it. I’m already out of breath, and my pulse is pounding inside my dick.

“Don’t move. Don’t say a word. Don’t come until I say.” His harsh words compel me to obey. I feel all my nerve endings waking up, and at the same time, my body relaxes for him. His calm, threatening dominance has such a physical impact on me. It’s an instinctual response. A submissive one that I suspect only Uri can trigger in me—since I fought like hell against that other dom at the club.

He pulls my cheeks apart and buries his face in my ass, closing his mouth over my hole. I immediately part my legs even further and arch up toward him, offering myself, unable to hold back.

The first flick of his tongue has all thoughts leaving my mind—forever lost. The pleasure is overwhelming. He makes a snarling sound and then lashes at my hole with heavy, fast licks. His hands tightening on my ass cheeks forces them farther apart. I’m drowning in ecstasy.

“The face you’re making is so dirty, Baby Blue.” He smirks before lowering his head down again. His lips move against my soaked pucker, making obscene sounds that turn me on even more. “I’m the only one who will ever fucking see it. And this gaping, thirsty hole.” He smacks it twice, making my hips jerk up from the bed.

Oh dear God! I’m oversensitive, right on the edge. These new sensations are sending shudders through my body. Then he does more and buries his tongue and face in me, waking up all the nerves surrounding my hole.

“Fuck this ass! I can taste my cum in you.” He moans, like he’s enjoying a delicious dish. “You’re melting on my tongue.”

His hand falls down on my right cheek and thigh. I moan all my bliss as he keeps eating me out and smacking my lower body. My thighs and ass burn, my insides are all wet and filled up. I’m in heaven.

He strokes my burning skin after every slap, as if trying to soothe it, yet the intensity of the slaps never quells. He comforts me with the same hand he uses to hit me. Pleasure and pain are yet again connected.

I’m burning for him inside and outside, whimpering as he tongue-fucks me deeply.

“My Sari likes to have his asshole played with.”

*Yes, I do. I do.* I want to say, but I’m breathless, chasing that orgasmic release. So close.

“Your hole sucks my tongue like it’s a cock.” I can feel the smile on his lips just before he goes back to work.

The noises coming from me are obscenely loud. But the pleasure is out of this world, and the contrast between the roughness of his stubble and the velvety quality of his tongue turns up the intensity even more.

I cry out as Uri suddenly lifts my hips and flips us. My hands shoot out over the sheets, even though Uri is holding me up effortlessly. My ass is on his face, right on his mouth.

“Ride my face,” he instructs me, sticking his tongue into my eager hole again.

My hips are already shamelessly gyrating and moving against his talented tongue. I fuck myself on it with wild abandon, one of my hands grabbing his dreads, attempting to get him deeper into me, deeper inside my hole.

I feel like I’m poised on the edge of desperation. I sob as I lose sense of time and space, pain and pleasure. I’m falling apart embarrassingly fast. But it’s Uri. Uri. My Uri.

The climax is brutal when it hits. I come with a muffled cry, writhing against his hungry mouth. I feel a rope of cum hit my chest before Uri takes my dick inside his hot, sucking mouth while his fingers replace his tongue. My brain feels fried. I shudder with bliss. I seem to have forgotten how to breathe; my arms are shaking under my weight.

I hear his lips release my shaft with a pop. And then he rolls me onto my belly and climbs over my body until he sits on my shoulders. His hand wraps around my neck, forcing my face to the side. His hard, long, pierced dick is the only thing I can see. His knees are on both sides of my head, caging me, forcing me down on the bed. He keeps arousing me to a higher level. But how many levels are there?

“I want your spit on my cock when I plunge into your loose hole.” His filthy talk gets me to yet another level.

He slaps his length on my cheek, the sting erupting on my face makes my lips throb as much as my dick. Then he rubs the wet tip over my mouth, painting the plump flesh, lingering on the stinging cut on my lower lip—from when the bastard at the club slapped me. That felt wrong and cringey, not pleasurable at all, I hated every minute of it. While being cock-slapped by Uri’s dick makes me want to offer the other cheek. And he knows it, smirking so smugly as he keeps stroking his pierced head over my face. I stick out my tongue, licking the bead of pre-cum off the tip. It makes him growl like a wild animal, while I feel empowered.

“Open wide and suck hard,” he orders, just before he pushes it in my mouth—in this position with my head turned to the side, he can’t go very deep. I swallow and twist my tongue just like he taught me. I can’t move, and it’s harder to breathe since I’m belly down, pushing on my lungs. That just heightens my pleasure.

“Such a good cock sleeve. Drool for me,” he snarls, mercilessly fucking my face. I would smile if my lips weren’t stretched to the maximum, and tell him to use me as he pleases if my mouth wasn’t stuffed with dick. His hand

around my throat is loose, only his thumb is pressing on it right where his cock is driving in and out. His piercing keeps dragging over my tongue, reminding me how good it felt inside my butt.

My sight is turning blurry as my brain is not getting enough oxygen. I'm dizzy now; I feel my eyes are rolling inside my head. Ecstasy hits me hard again as I choke on his dick. Just when I'm about to pass out, he pulls back and dismounts from me.

I find myself in his arms, on my side, my back pressing flush to Uri's front. Heat radiates from his skin wherever we touch. His body comforting mine. His muscular thigh pressing down on my waist, his forearm around my chest, his fingers playing with my hair.

My mind is still blank as I try to catch my breath. He suddenly spreads the burning flesh of my ass cheeks and thrusts himself inside my sore hole, slamming home. Every inch of me is filled with every inch of him again. Uri is inside me. My only love is in me.

"You're squeezing me, Christ!" I'm only faintly aware of his words, because the stretch is painful in the most perfect way. His jizz fills me up as he gives a hard thrust, pressing hard and deep, groaning my name. I love this. I will never get enough of him.

"I want to live in your fucking pearly skin. Engrave my name all over your body." The clear fixation in his voice doesn't frighten me. Instead it pushes a sigh of happiness out of my mouth. I want him to carve my flesh, to leave a permanent mark on me. Crazy? Maybe, but I don't care anymore. I just want us to be…us.

He isn't moving now, but seems content to just be inside me, reaching the deepest part. His leg feels heavy on my hip. My eyes fall to the tattoos on his thigh. The date of my birthday in Roman numerals, the name I gave to his first restaurant, Winnie—the cute pet lizard I kept in my bedroom until it escaped—even the x-ray of my heart which I took for a high-school science project.

I feel tears fill my eyes. I would have told him how I felt if I had seen them. Because these tattoos are like a confession, not of his love but of his

everlasting, unchangeable, and undying obsession with me. Why did he hide them from me?

I snuggle closer to him—if that's even possible—and wrap his arm more tightly around my chest. The movement makes me squeeze around his length, pushing some of his cum out of me.

"No shower. I want to smell my cum on you." He nips at my ear.

Hearing Uri be so possessive turns me on more than it should. But I really need a shower.

"I do like the smell of you on my body, but I feel sticky," I admit.

He grunts, squeezing me in his arms a bit too tightly before he lets me go. His dick slips out of me. Ouch, I feel sore. I stand up—with some effort since I ache all over—and head for the bathroom when Uri's voice stops me mid-step.

"Don't move."

I glance back over my shoulder as I hear his order. "What is it?"

He doesn't reply, and I wait, trying not to wiggle as cum slides out of my ass and runs down my legs.

"Fucking beautiful." His gaze is trained on my lower back. The twisted, proud smirk that crosses his face makes me blush and shiver at the same time.

"What is?" I'm breathless all of a sudden.

"My cum leaving your hole." His hand is on his half-hard cock, stroking it while his gaze is fixed on my dripping butt. He's so handsome and sexy. All those powerful muscles, cool tattoos and dreads, those piercings, and that big shaft. And he's looking at me like he wants to devour me all over.

Feeling audacious, spurred on by his hungry eyes, I reach down and run my fingers through the wet mess, then glide them up into my ass crack.

He growls, jumps from the bed, and prowls toward me. "You're too fucking hot." He pulls me back against his chest and slides his dick between my

slick ass cheeks, rubbing against my loosened hole. He feels divine.

“Shower with me?” I ask him.

“Try and stop me.”

After a long, very thorough shower with two more orgasms, he dries up and takes me back to bed. We are lying face to face now. I’m brushing his earrings one after the other, the piercing on his eyebrow, his lip. I think about the barbell on his tongue and further down.

“How many piercings do you have?”

“Fifteen,” he replies with a husky voice.

“No nipples?” I ask, puckering my lips, a metal hoop would have looked hot on his dark bud. I lightly stroke it with my fingers, smiling at how fast it turns rigid.

“It takes too long to recover.” He covers my hand and guides my palm over his chest. “And I want you to touch me all over.”

I lean in so my face is in his neck, feeling like the intimacy of this moment is going to swallow me whole. I take a big inhale of his scent. It makes me hum in pleasure. It’s like a drug that slowly dissolves into my bloodstream, triggering all of the dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins, the happy hormones in my body. I move my nose down to his neck and collarbone; his sigh resounds in the bedroom, and I can feel the hardness of his dick against my leg.

Is this really happening?

“Maybe I should pierce my nipples then,” I hazard. I think Uri’d like that.

“No!” He pulls my head up, his nose against mine. “You will not. Nobody touches your chest but me.” He slaps my nipple and then slides me up the sheets to pull it into his mouth to bite and suck it hard.

Shit! I moan as I let my head drop back. But Uri isn’t having it. He grabs my hair and forces my eyes back to his gorgeous face still torturing my nipple. I can’t come anymore, it’s physically impossible after all the orgasms I’ve had.

“A beautiful shade of red, my new favorite.” He’s staring at my abused chest, and when his hands close on the sensitive skin of my butt, I wince slightly.

“Hurts?” he asks, brushing the flesh lightly. I nod. The burn feels good, but it’s also a bit uncomfortable.

He lets me go to take something from the nightstand. When he faces me again, he’s holding a jar of ointment. He starts to rub it on my chest, it feels refreshing with a minty smell. His hands move to my cheek, neck, collarbone, sides, then he rolls me to apply the cream on my buttocks and inner thighs. He marked me all over, and although it’s mad, I hope he’ll do it every time we have sex.

“The swelling will be gone tomorrow,” he lets me know.

“Did you care for them too after…your sessions?” I ask, feeling suddenly grim.

“Fuck no,” he exclaims straight away, lifting some of the dark mood off my shoulders. “Your pale skin bruises so beautifully easily, I like to see my marks on you, Baby Blue.”

He moves me to my side and spoons me. I feel the head of his cock push against my sore entrance again.

“Relax, it just wants in,” he says before pushing inside me with a swift pump. I sigh contentedly, enjoying the fullness again. The truth is that every kind of feeling from Uri is welcome. And him inside me half-hard, licking the back of my neck, as he thrusts slowly against my ass feels like everything I’ve ever wanted.

“I love you.” The confession flies out of my mouth with ease.

He presses me closer to him, his dick reaches a deeper part of me when his legs lace with mine.

“I don’t love you, Sari. Love is such a tricky, fleeting emotion, I don’t understand why people long for that shit.” His fingers curl around my neck as his mouth moves closer to my ear. “I see you as mine,” he whispers, almost sinfully, “I always have. My body and mind both agree on where

you belong: by my side. Permanently. Even if I have to go to the farthest depths of hell to keep you."

I always dreamed of this day. The guy I love telling me he *loves* me back. My heart would burst through my mouth, and I'd cry with happiness. Instead a blanket of utter tranquility falls on me as I hear his words. What he said goes further than any fantasy I've ever had. He can't love me since sociopaths are incapable of that, but I know that what he feels for me is the strongest emotion he'll ever have toward another person.

"That's all I need," I say, covering his hand over my neck and intertwining our fingers around my throat.

"What you need right now is to be fucked."

And he does just that, stopping only when the light starts peeking between the bedroom curtains.

*Does the fact that I love to be fucked while sleeping make me a pervert?*

Three days later, I leave the bathroom and walk to the bedroom with that thought twirling in my head. Uri and I have being going at it like rabbits. My body aches spectacularly everywhere and my heart feels so full. I've never been this happy in my life.

I let the towel fall down on the floor. I'm wearing only a pink silk thong after deciding against a bra. Uri likes to play with my nipples, and they've gotten very sensitive. The feel of lingerie rubbing against them is quite arousing, and I don't want to pop a boner while talking in front of a crowd of students. My lecture is scheduled for this morning at the University of Illinois main campus in Urbana, a town a little outside Chicago and I need to hurry up and get ready.

When I'm done, I walk downstairs and into the kitchen—after quickly checking on Albert E. The sight of Uri sitting at the table makes me lose my

breath for a moment. My heart keeps fluttering and settling again and again. Anxiety and comfort tangle inside me.

He's wearing a pair of black pants and a dark gray, V-neck sweater that looks tight on his fit upper body. No shirt underneath, revealing part of his tattooed collarbone.

He looks me up and down, narrowing his eyes at my pants. They are tight, but the boyfriend cardigan reaches mid-thigh.

"What?"

"Do the buttons," he demands absurdly.

"They are done." I look down at the two fastened in the middle. I'm wearing a turtleneck underneath, for hell's sake.

"All of them."

I hold his death stare, not afraid in the least. "I'm hungry," I say when too much time passes in this ridiculous staring contest.

"Sit. I bought your favorite." He points at the chair near his.

"Croissant with pear and chocolate?" I ask, hopeful.

"From that bakery on Green Bay Road." He nods, and I smile brightly, forgetting everything else as I move to the table.

When did he buy it? Did he go this morning? The bakery is here in Winnetka, but it must have taken him twenty minutes to go there and come back. His ridiculously high level of dominance is tempered by how thoughtful and attentive he can be.

I sit next to him, but he doesn't move. He keeps drinking his coffee; his other hand is wrapped around a steaming mug which contains what looks like tea. My tea. I move my hand toward the mug, but he slides it away. I turn my frown to him, confused by his strange behavior. His eyes glance down at my chest—and my half-buttoned cardigan—before moving back to my face.

Is he serious? My mouth turns slack as he keeps sipping his damn drink like his insane actions are perfectly justified.

I want to defy him so badly, but a glance at the kitchen clock tells me I don't have much time before I have to leave. And I really want my croissant.

I let out an angry growl, to which he snorts. Snorts! The sociopath! I give him the most furious glower I can produce as I start to button up my cardigan. He waits until I finish before placing the tea in front of me and getting the croissant from the kitchen.

He sets the plate on the table and gives my head a kiss. When I huff, he pulls on my braid, tilting my head all the way up to crush his mouth to mine and gorge on my taste. The ardent kiss tastes like coffee. It demolishes my annoyance, consuming all the fighting spirit inside me. My toes curl and my heart climbs into my throat as I let him devour me.

Before going back to his seat, he lands another hard kiss on my puffy lips. He has a smug close-mouthed smile on his perfect face. It makes me realize that I need to up my game against him. I can't keep yielding so easily.

"Stop looking so smug!" I scold him.

He leans forward, elbows resting on his knees, and grasps my thigh, squeezing the muscle like he needs to remind me that I'm his.

"How can I not when I put that dazed expression on your beautiful face?"

And swoon. I'm melting because Uri is not a romantic person, what he states are facts. He really thinks I'm beautiful.

I start eating my croissant, otherwise I'll jump on him and never get out of this house. I have a lab and Albert E. is here, so I don't actually need to go outside. Uri's crazy illusion of keeping me locked up is growing on me. I better hurry and go give my lecture before turning completely mad.

"The driver will be here in fifteen minutes," I say more to myself than him. "Don't get that look in your eyes."

"What look?" he asks.

“That look that says you want to do something *illegal* to anyone who gets too close to me.” Not that I hate that. I know that something might be wrong with me, but his obsession makes my body tingle. And I can’t tell him that. He would feel even freer to do slightly or totally immoral things in my name.

“Fucking hate this. I’d cancel today, but—”

“It’s a marathon for paraplegic children. You need to go.” I wish I could go with him. I love this side of him. He supports various charities, mostly for kids. We all do, but Uri and Raph are the ones who show their faces and shake hands usually.

He shoves his chair back so abruptly, it screeches across the onyx black tiles.

“Didn’t you have breakfast? Is that why you are so temperamental this morning?” I ask sassily.

“That fucker is going to be there,” he growls.

My brows furrow. “Who?”

“Your colleague. Trent the fucker Dohner,” he snarls.

Ohhhh. I completely forgot about him. “Want some of my croissant? No?” I try to change the subject, which only seems to aggravate his mood more. His glare darkens further. “Stop being unreasonable, I need to go give the lecture, it’s for my job.”

“Unreasonable? You make my ego non-existent.”

“Good,” I state, taking another bite of the croissant from heaven.

“I’ll come pick you up,” he declares with finality, wiping some chocolate from the corner of my mouth before sucking on his finger.

“And be that guy who gets his boyfriend from work and kisses him in front of his colleagues so they know to keep their hands off?”

I see the smile stretching over his face as he mouths the word boyfriend.

I feel my cheeks turning red. That word just slipped out. But he seems quite happy with the title.

“Your boyfriend can’t piss on his territory.” He points at me—I’m his territory. “But that’s one way to get my point across, I suppose.”

Is he fucking serious? “Agh, no!” I say in a disgusted tone as he yanks me by the hand on top of him. I spread my fingers over his wide shoulders as I let him cop a feel of my lower back. He squeezes and then growls in my ear, giving it a sharp bite. Oh, shit. I’ve activated possessive, sociopathic Uriel.

“If I see Trent the fucker trying to touch what’s mine…” Trent the fucker, Rami is going to love the nickname. “I’ll cut his wrists,” he informs me. The threat doesn’t sound as gory as I expected. “And toss him in a piranha tank.” There it is.

I grin, not at the brutal and intimidating warning, but at his jealousy. It isn’t brotherly overprotectiveness. It’s my boyfriend’s possessiveness.

Happy laughter bursts from my chest before I seal my mouth over his. I gently pull the hoop around his lip with my teeth, and when I let go, I see something in his eyes. A dirty, dark, you-are-mine something that makes my dick stand to attention.

“And where are you going to find piranhas?” I mock him.

“I think I like this newfound side of you, feisty and snarky.” He rubs his hard dick against my ass, making me moan and establishing who’s in control again. Like I had any doubt about it.

“I’ll be there at the end of your lecture,” he promises.

“Okay. It’s a good cause, this charity. You’re amazing for doing this.”

“You know I can’t feel empathy for those kids.” He’s licking my neck right under my ear, leaving a very visible mark there—too high to cover with the turtleneck.

I know he mostly does those charity appearances to meet influential people and exploit them, to get something for himself, but also us. He thinks about

his family. That's why I like what he does even more. And that's enough for me. It's more than most people do.

"Four bodyguards will be with you at all times."

Four? "One, Uri. I mean it. Otherwise, they will take the attention away from my lecture. I need people to stay focused."

"The stalker is still out there."

He's right; the memory of those awful packages makes my skin crawl. But the stalker seems to have stopped. Did he get fed up?

"One bodyguard."

Uri's hand slides inside the back of my pants, and two fingers brush against my clenching hole. "Four, Baby Blue. This isn't a negotiation. I need you safe."

"You're so controlling." And so damn sexy.

He hums. "And you love me like crazy."

I caress his dreads and let my finger rub against the mole on his cheek. "I think we're both crazy here."

He sniffs dismissively. "Would you like your *boyfriend* to show you something?"

I raise my brow at him. "Is that *something* in your pants?"

"Would love nothing more than to be inside you," he whispers, licking his lips. "And reach even deeper. But we both need to leave soon."

He doesn't care about being punctual; he just wants me to feel the sweet suffering that comes with the wait, and God, I love him and hate him right now.

He lifts a square box from the seat next to him and sets it on the table behind me.

"What is it?" I smile expectantly.

“Raise your clothes over your collarbone.”

I do as he orders, listening to him open the box.

He’s holding…two little pink nipple clamps with a rose gold chain dangling between them. The sight of the two teasing toys in addition to the cold air hitting my bare chest makes me shiver.

“They are equipped with tension adjustments, to control the pleasure and the pain,” he lets me know as he licks his thumb and strokes it over my nipple to turn it hard. As soon as it does he applies the clamp. I hiss at the sudden sharp pinch, and then Uri’s tongue pushes inside my mouth twisting around mine as he rubs my other nipple before attaching the other clamp.

“How’s that?” he asks, as he keeps giving me short, wet kisses.

My nipples sting, the discomfort is manageable and arousing. My chest was a bit tender from last night and the days before that, but the extra tenderness actually intensifies the pleasure.

“Perfect.” Hearing my reply, he curls his lips into a crooked smile. It soon turns twisted and a little scary, so why does my hole clench eagerly around nothing?

His finger flickering against the clamp makes me jerk back.

“Sensitive.” He stares intently at my chest. His tongue comes out, and he plays with the piercing there, twisting it around and biting it. I wince and gasp, imagining him doing it on my nipples.

When his teasing eyes meet mine, I know he’s doing it on purpose. Is it some kind of a punishment? Uri knows by now that I can never resist him. Seriously, sometimes I detest how easily I fold like wet paper whenever he touches me. It’s infuriating considering that he could make me do whatever he wants.

“Now turn around, push your ass out and bend over the table,” he instructs me with a slap on my side…and this is exactly what I’m talking about.

I release the grip on my clothes, letting the fabric cover my torso again—I can’t see the little clamps under it.

“But I thought—”

He cuts me off. “I won’t fuck you.” He slides me to the edge of his knees and helps me turn around.

When I stand up, he unbuttons my jeans and pushes them down without taking them off before giving my back a little tug. I move my chest toward the table surface, pointing my thong-clad butt in Uri’s direction.

He slides a finger over the thong’s edge and pushes the flimsy strip covering my crack to the side.

I see his hand on the box again, grabbing four small balls attached in a series with a flared end.

His lips brush my ear as he starts talking. “They are called anal beads, used to stimulate the nerve endings of your anus through movement.”

I suck in a sharp breath when I feel something cold dripping on my ass. It’s lube. Then a finger spears my hole, followed by another. “Every step you take will make you think of me, even though I won’t be there,” he rumbles as I feel the first ball slip inside me, cold compared to Uri’s fingers.

I moan as he chuckles and pushes another ball in. “You’ll squeeze hard around those beads and imagine my cock.” He inserts the last two balls in one swift push. I arch my back as he rubs his dick roughly against me, jolting those balls inside and making me see stars. He grinds his hips again and then slides a hand under my clothes to pulls on the chain between the clamps. Pleasure and pain blend inside my body, fighting for supremacy, and I’m about to come inside my thong when Uri’s hand squeezes around my dick.

I whimper as he halts my release, and my head falls heavily forward.

“You won’t take them out unless I say so, and you won’t touch yourself.”

“I’m already on the verge now, how can I…?” I can’t finish the sentence, too horrified by the thought of talking in front of a lecture hall with sex toys inside my ass and on my nipples.

“You can and you will,” he scolds me, asserting his dominance. “Spontaneous orgasms are allowed.”My body vibrates over Uri’s words, urging me to moan my submission to him.

I’m still learning, figuring out what my body needs and craves inside the bedroom. Over the last few days spent with Uri, I’ve found out that I like to be ridden hard into submission, I get off on filthy talk, and well-ordered words make my dick leak. A light whipping is not bad, but spanking, biting, and pinching all get me going. I like these out-of-my-comfort-zone experiments.

I’m eager to find out what else I’m into. In the meantime, I need to figure out a way to give my lecture without coming in public.

People keep pouring into the oval-shaped lecture hall where I’ll shortly talk. It makes me feel deeply honored and screwed at the same time. Two of the four bodyguards Uri hired are outside, and the other two are a few feet away, scanning the crowd. I’m actually more at ease knowing they are here. I’m with a couple of other lecturers and Dr. Dench, the assistant dean who keeps talking about the university and how greatly their research department has improved thanks to my company’s donation. I spent two hours going around campus with her and meeting people.

Then I had a coffee with Michael, who unfortunately won’t be able to come—but he asked one of his students to take a video of my lecture…crap. Also Ren texted me he’s stuck in class. Too bad, but I’m kind of glad. I almost blurted out about the toys to Michael out of pure frustration.

“Oh my, we need a bigger lecture hall.” Dr. Dench smiles at me. I’d be more focused on what she’s saying if I wasn’t trying so hard to keep my body in check.

The car ride and then walking around was the sweetest torment I’ve ever experienced. I had to stop four times feigning a light stomach burn, when in

reality my nipples and ass overstimulation was the real cause of my odd behavior. I was so tense, every little movement felt like a shock.

Now blazing flames are burning my insides; the pain turns to pleasure then to pain again. My body and mind are both confused since the two sensations have merged into one. I keep sweating, but I can't take off my coat, afraid everybody will get an eyeful of the hard-on I'm sporting—even though the cardigan is covering it.

I don't know what I'm doing. I've never been this far out of my comfort zone, so incredibly far that I'm out in the wilderness.Powerless. And even though I'm a little scared, there's this thrilling sensation in the pit of my stomach. It makes my body tingle with excitement.

I take a sneak peek at the crowd, hoping to see Uri, even though he said he'll come at the end of the lecture—I might die from sensory overload in the next minute.

A face I already know catches my eyes. The intern who came into my lab a few days ago. What was her name again? Marnie? Miriam? It started with an M, I think. She's excitedly waving at me from one of the seats, which tells me Raph didn't fire her—otherwise a glare would be aimed at me. She must be a postdoctoral researcher at this university, or a PhD student. I give her a quick, tense smile before concentrating on Dr. Dench again.

My phone vibrates inside my coat, and I excuse myself to check my messages.

THE ONE I BELONG TO

Don't let the fucker come near you, Sari

ME

When did you change your name on my phone, Uri?

THE ONE I BELONG TO

I just registered the right name

ME

What's mine on your phone?

THE ONE I BELONG TO

Baby Blue Eyes

My happiness doesn’t last long as I read his next message.

THE ONE I BELONG TO

I’m serious. Rami found out Trent the fucker likes to make raunchy videos without the full consent of the participants. He tried to delete them, but Rami found some in his cloud or whatever. I’m on my way. Stay away from him.

Dread fills me. I should thank God I’m not in one of those videos—Uri would turn ballistic and kill Trent on the spot. But raunchy videos without his partner’s consent? That sounds odd. We just jerked off and exchanged a tepid kiss.

THE ONE I BELONG TO

I’ll know if you don’t. I’ll fucking impale him on a street pole

I’d roll my eyes if I wasn’t still feeling a little disturbed and confused by what Rami found out about Trent.

ME

You can’t do that; we have a code

My phone starts ringing. The One I Belong to is calling. I move further away from the others as I pick up.

“Fuck. The. Code,” he states as soon as I pick up, anger oozing from his voice. “All bets are off when you are involved, and he’s an acceptable donor.”

“Uri, he isn’t even here. I probably won’t even see him.” And he isn’t an acceptable donor.

“But I want the fucker to be there so I can actually turn my *blood gushing from all his fucking holes as he screams in agony* fantasy into reality.”

“Stop it! The only one screaming today will be me, with frustration. The… toys are killing me,” I whisper-yell, closing my eyes against the feel of my shirt grazing over those damn clamps. God, the constant sensation is almost overpowering. I might pass out.

“Is it the beads inside your ass and the way your hole squeezes around them? Or those clamps pinching tightly and incessantly?”

He’s torturing me with his words as well. When is this torment going to end? And do I really want it to end?

I catch Dr. Dench signaling me. “I gotta go, you asshole!” I snap.

“It’s your asshole we’re talking about.” *So facetious*! “Remember, I’ll chain you to the bed if you get near that fu—”

I end the call with a scoff. I’m dying here, and he’s talking about chaining me to the bed. He can’t be serious. The problem is that I never know with Uri. Imagining being tied up, though, is more a turn on than I expected. But now is not the time for this.

I make my way to the microphone on the raised platform. I walk slowly, holding my breath as I feel the beads sliding inside me. The tiny shifts give life to sparks of heat spreading all over my body, turning my insides into a blazing inferno. When I finally reach the mic, I feel sweat rolling down my spine, my hairline turns damp, and all I want to do is to strangle Uri. And also ride his big, thick, hard cock—only thinking about that piercing… I clench and it’s agonizing madness all over.

Silence has fallen in the room.

I clear my throat before starting. “I’m Dr. Sariel Bear-Stone. I’m a researcher and co-founder of Bear-Stone Labs. I’m honored to be here with you today…”

For the next thirty minutes, the lecture goes smoothly—being still kind of helps halt the incredible sensations bombarding my body—barely. When I’m done and the applause subsides, I answer some questions—trying not to squirm as I stand in front of around a hundred people.

“Aren’t you working on exploring the use of genomic sequencing for early disease detection?” The third person asks. It’s a guy, and his tone carries a hint of hostility.

I prepare myself. Raph trained me on how to talk to journalists thirsty for a scoop, this seems quite similar to that. “Among other things, yes.”

“Your company announced it was a non-profit research project, but doesn’t the fact that it aims to give personalized treatment plans imply patients will

need to pay for them?”

“Some might, depending on the disease. Our company, though, won’t be the one taking the money.” Our healthcare system is rigged. Changing it is not impossible, but nearly. All I can do is work hard and try to help as many people as I can.

“But it did in the past,” the student insists. If it did, I’m sure Raph had his reasons—probably to get to a donor. We have enough money as it is. We don’t need more.

“Is this a David-versus-Goliath battle? Or perhaps a personal vendetta?” Uri’s voice booms in the hall, as he slowly descends the stairs, with confidence and arrogance, between the multi-level rows of seating.

“W-what?” the student stutters, starting to look flustered.

He’s here finally, but what is he talking about?

“I’m just asking Mr. Bear-Stone—”

“*Dr.* Bear-Stone,” Uri corrects him, stopping right next to the student with a murderous look pointed at him. That same glare has made many donors sob in the past—the torture implement he was handling at the time might have also had something to do with it.

“I’m only trying to get to the truth.”

“And the fact that you were fired from Bear-Stone Labs two months ago for attempting to leak confidential information for a very high price has nothing to do with this pretense? Are you even a student at this university?”

Okay, that’s possible since the labs have many employees and I don’t know all of them. But how does Uri know that? He must have used Serena and the CCTV in the lecture hall to use the facial recognition program Rami created or he just called Raph and put his eidetic memory to use.

This whole thing is getting on my nerves now, probably because I’ve reached my tolerance limit. I need to remove those beads now.

“It’s an open lecture,” the guy replies strongly, without denying all the rest. “Who are you? You look familiar. Why are you defending him?”

“Why do you expect an answer?” Uri counters, before leaning toward the student and whispering something low. I can’t hear what he’s saying, but I know my boyfriend is threatening him.

*Boyfriend*. It’s nice to think of him like that.

“Mr. Mahoe,” I call him, but he doesn’t acknowledge me. Still too busy scaring the student to death.

I lift my hand to pull at my braid brushing it against my nipple and the clamp around it. The burn unfurls, spreading to the areola and my whole pec. I barely stifle the moan climbing inside my throat by gritting my teeth hard. I can’t anymore. I suddenly feel a heavy arm wrap around my shoulders, and Uri’s sandalwood scent envelops me.

I look up. He’s staring at me, his eyes moving to my chest and back to my face and down again. He swallows and rakes his teeth over his lower lip, catching the hoop piercing between them. He looks…hungry. Pre-cum drips down my dick as I clench my ass, pushing those beads further inside me. I gasp and Uri tugs me toward the exit as I hear Dr. Dench announcing the end of the lecture. The bodyguards follow us, halting whoever tries to get close.

I feel slightly bad about it, but I really can’t stop to chat with anyone. The cold winter air helps a little, but not much. I’m still on the verge of having an orgasm right here in the middle of the Alumni Walk.

“You did good, Baby Blue. Now it’s time to get your reward,” he whispers darkly, and this time I let the moan free. I really deserve it; I’ve been enduring for the past five hours.

He’s guiding me toward a faculty room, to the temporary office they provided me—a little perk the dean provided me thanks to the donations my company made to the university. We are almost at the door when I hear someone calling my name.

“Sari, darling!”

No!

When I turn, Trent is jogging our way, and I feel Uri pull me closer, tucking me under his arm.

*Why now?*

I study Trent as he comes closer. His sweet smile has a wicked curve to it, his eyes look open and bright, a bit leery as they travel up and down my body. He seems genuinely happy to see me. I give him a close-mouthed smile.

“Trent,” is all I am capable of saying. Uri is playing with my braid, stroking the end over my burning nipple. Ass!

“I listened to your lecture. Exceptional and erudite as always.” He doesn’t even glance at Uri but keeps his eyes on me.

“Thank you.” My voice sounds high-pitched.

“Your recent study sounds fascinating. I was wondering if you’d like to share a meal together and exchange our thoughts.” Raunchy sex? This guy? I shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, but really? *I’m a clear example of that saying, though.*

“He can’t,” Uri replies for me; I feel his breath brushing the top of my head.

Trent's eyes finally acknowledge him, and he opens his mouth, surely to reply, but stops after glancing at me. “Sari, are you okay? You look a little heated.” He takes a step toward me.

I swallow hard, hoping to get some moisture into my dry mouth.

“We need to go,” Uri interjects again.

“Wait. You are one of Sari’s foster brothers, right?” Trent asks. “We met at Bear-Stone Labs a few months back.”

Uri sniffs. His fingers suddenly push the turtleneck down my throat. “Dibs” he whispers in my ear, before giving the sensitive skin a long, toe-curling lick. A flash of me saying the same thing while licking Uri’s neck in a bar pops into my head.

“Uri,” I utter with a trembling voice.

I can feel his cocky smile against my neck, the easy one that can turn ferocious in a blink of an eye. “You mean Sari’s boyfriend,” he clarifies, staring Trent down. I think lapping at my neck in public screams intimacy enough.

Uri has no problem holding my hand, kissing me, or just generally touching me. I wouldn’t call it affection, more like a claim on me to let everybody know—me included—who I belong to.

Trent doesn’t hide his surprise at the news. A deep frown appears on his face for a moment.

“You’ve been lurking around what’s mine for a while,” Uri feels the need to add. I put a hand on his chest and look up at him, my mouth slightly open in surprise. His intense dark stare is fixed on Trent’s confused face.

“Have I?”

It feels like an alpha pissing contest. I just want to remove those beads and get fucked.

“It ends today,” Uri growls, making me gasp as he squeezes my jeans-clad ass cheek hard in his hand. Then he grabs my wrist and pulls me inside the faculty room—ordering the bodyguards to stay outside and not let anybody in. I give Trent a quick glance; he doesn’t seem happy as he sends me a serious look.

Inside, the room is deserted. My office is the last door on the left. Uri drags me in and locks the door. His hot mouth is on mine in an instant. I moan. He uses that opening to push me flat against the wall and off my feet as he deepens the kiss. He tastes like mint, lust, and heaven. I lose the ability to think as he wreaks havoc on me. His chest is rubbing against my hurting nipples, making my whole chest go up in flames, while his thumb is pushing against my hole like he’s trying to feel the beads inside me. Pleasure tears through me like wildfire, spreading heat throughout my lower half, while pain keeps blazing in my upper half. Holy. Hell. I whimper against his tongue.

He breaks the kiss and orders me to keep my mouth open as he lets saliva drop from his tongue to mine. “Drink my spit,” he grunts.

When I oblige, all I can taste is this moment. All I can see is the feral desire in his eyes.

“Please,” I beg him, tears filling my eyes. I want to come so badly.

With a smirk, he starts taking off my cardigan—one button, another button—too slowly, grazing my nipples with his knuckles, forcing my body to squirm under him.

His eyes are fixed on me avidly. His cock stirs against my belly and goes from half-roused to hard as a rock within seconds. The cardigan falls on the floor, followed by the turtleneck. God, I’m free. The cold air doesn’t help anymore, my nipples are turning numb.

“You’re stunning.” His voice is hoarse and gravelly. He pulls on the chain dangling between the clamps, and my back arches as tears wet my cheeks.

“How can this feel so amazingly good and overwhelmingly painful at the same time?” I slur. My brain seems to have stopped working.

“I’m sure you’ve thought about the scientific side of it,” he says, putting me down to yank my shoes and socks off. He pops the button of my jeans open and drags them down. “Pain triggers the release of endorphins, the natural pain relievers and euphoria-inducing chemicals. They activate the areas in your brain associated with pleasure and reward.”

*Like the limbic and prefrontal regions.*

“Also pain can provide a contrast that makes pleasure feel more intense. But you know what I think, Baby Blue?” He pins me against the wall again, with my legs around his waist. “Your pleasure simply derives from the masochistic pain I inflict on you, the suffering. You can still come if we have vanilla sex, but this?” He slaps my hole, jolting the beads inside me and making me see stars from the sting. “You fucking crave it.”

He pulls on the beads, forcing an unintelligible noise out of my lips. He doesn’t take them out, but fucks me with them. Yes, finally. I try to move my hips, but he keeps them still.

“Your underwear is soaked. You’ve been leaking all this time.” He licks the side of my face and bites my ear, sending a jolt down my body. Then he

pulls on the chain, making me scream as the clamps tug my stiff nipples once again. I realize that my hands are under his shirt, clawing at him.

“Don’t think about anything else, just feel what I’m doing to you, feel the bliss I’m giving you.”

“Uri,” I cry as he pumps those beads faster.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. Yes, say my name. Say it out loud. Say who’s the only guy who’ll ever know how lewd you are.” Another pull on the chain.

“It’s…ahhhh.” Too much and still not enough.

With a hard tug, he yanks all the beads out. A hot flicker of rapt bliss races to every part of me, from the tip of my head to the tips of my toes as my whole body jerks and spasms. My orgasmic sounds fill the room.

“Fuck, Sari. You’re so damn perfect.” He’s whispering, panting into my ear while my body is still feeling the aftershock of the strongest ecstasy I’ve ever experienced.

“Everything is made to be broken. Some more than others. I’ll wreck you and put you together again every single time, my Baby Blue.” He smirks, all satisfied before giving me a hard kiss.

“Put me inside you,” he then demands with a growl on my lips.

“First,” I pause to suck in some air, “take off your shirt. Want to see the tattoos. Want to see our life story inked on your skin again.” The tangible proof of your obsession for me.

Uri slides off his jacket and lets it drop on the floor. The sweater suffers the same fate, displaying his hard-muscled, gleaming, honey-gold torso covered in tattoos. He has ink on that ridged V of muscle just inside his hips. It’s a tattoo of the switchblade I gave him, the one he always carries. How did I not notice how fixated he is with me?

My eyes keep trailing up and down his body. His broad shoulders, those rounded muscles, the straight lines of his hips, the expanse of his hairless chest, the turtle-shell abs, the jut of his hip bones, and the curves of his

biceps. Every part of him is tempting my worshipful tongue. I want to kiss and lick and taste all that sinful skin. I feel lightheaded and short of breath only thinking about it.

“I want you with every fiber of my being,” I confess, without an ounce of embarrassment.

His jaw ticks, his eyes turn piercing. He unbuttons his pants, letting his hard dick slap against his abs. His balls look heavy and big, filled with cum for me, the tip of his shaft shiny and red. He lets spit fall on his cock, takes my hips in both hands, lines his dick with my entrance, and thrusts hard and long and deep, taking my breath away. It stings a little. But he easily slides inside and rearranges everything in me to make space for his long, thick cock with that one smooth motion.

“Your body is used to my shape by now. I can go balls deep in one slide.” He grunts. “So fucking loose for me. You’ve got a vacuum hole.”

The slap of skin on skin increases as he rams his dick inside me until I start crying.

“Feed me your salty tears. Fuck!” He licks my cheek. “Even those are mine.”

I nod, clenching on his pumping dick every time he pulls out.

My reaction must excite him because his movements speed up. I am lust-drunk, so close to orgasm again. His cock’s pistoning pace is accentuated by my soft whimpers.

“Squeeze the tip of my dick when I fuck you deep, it feels so damn good.” Uri’s dreads are falling forward, his head bent down so that he can watch his shaft fucking me, his eyes hypnotized by our dirty, sexy connection. He’s so masculine and powerful, and all for me. The way he’s fucking me senseless is driving me insane. He’s really trying to alter my insides to fit him like a glove. And I love every single hard drive of his powerful, pounding hips.

His fingers move to my left nipple. He grips the clamp and pulls it off, making me hiss. My nipple is numb—and looks like it’s grown twice its normal size. His dick grinds inside of me as he bends down and sucks on

my red bud. The blood starts flowing again, and I scream as a burning sensation spreads from the aureola, while Uri continues sucking.

“Your pain feels so sweet to me. The sweetest fruit I’ve ever tasted,” he says, moving to the other clamp and removing that one as well. Now one nipple is hot, the other numb. He flicks the latter, and pain rushes down to my cock and explodes out of my slit.

“Yes,” I sob. My face is soaked in my own tears, I can’t stop the tremble in my body, but nothing matters anymore, nothing. The pain makes everything disappear, and then the pleasure hits. My eyes roll back inside my head, and I can’t stop coming.

I’m barely aware of being spun around and bent with my hands and elbows against the wall. He kicks my feet apart and shoves his dick inside me again. Both his hands curl over my chin and mouth, yanking my head back as he takes me like an animal.

“Did you feel how smoothly you welcomed me home?” he pants. Those beads prepped me so well.

“You’re my favorite fuck hole, Baby Blue. Perfectly molded to fit me.” I hear the smugness in his voice as he pulls hard on one abused nipple. My legs tremble for a moment, but Uri doesn’t seem to care.

Pain and pleasure are two sides of the same coin, and Uri just keeps flipping it, driving my body and mind insane.

“Show me who owns your body. Your mind. Your fucking soul. Fuck yourself on my dick. Use it as your personal dildo. Yeah, jiggle that ass. Fuck, that’s it.” His hand falls on my butt cheek. The crack ricochets between the office’s walls. The twinge only makes my hips move faster, my eager butt sticking out as I go on my tiptoes.

His fingers continue seducing, branding, and conquering me.

“Damn, you’re tighter than usual. Do you like risky sex? The thrill of being caught?”

“No,” I moan. But maybe there’s a bit of truth in his words. I haven’t been trying to stifle the noises leaving my mouth, and thinking of someone

hearing us makes me feel oddly excited.

His hand around my chin tightens, pulling my head further back.

“Fuck that. I’ll be the only one seeing you like this.” His teeth sink into my shoulder before his tongue licks the burn away. “Maybe I should engrave my name on you, so everyone will know who owns you.”

I give him better access to my neck. My dick is hard again when he takes hold of my waist and gives it to me rougher. Holy hell, my forehead falls on the wall, and my moans turn wild.

“Now milk the cum out of my dick. Show me how much you want to be filled up.” He pulls my back against his front; his hands hold onto my biceps. He’s chasing his orgasm with hammering hips. I’m so hard, it’s making my stomach ache, my blood pump faster, and my head spin.

Suddenly his body begins shaking against mine, and he groans; his dick twitches as he finds his own release. I swear I can feel his seed filling me up, hot and abundant. It’s like an orgasm trigger, my balls draw up tight, my hole clenches around him as if it’s trying to suck every last drop of his jizz. He keeps driving into me while white hot ecstasy scorches my insides and radiates all over my body. I jerk with violent spasms, exhausted and drained by the multiple orgasms—and the prior torture. It feels like pure hell and wicked paradise.

I breathe in his scent as time passes sluggishly. He’s still moving inside me, thrusting gently. We are both breathing hard. I dare to crack my eyes open, blinking dazedly. My head is lying on his shoulder. His arms are wrapped around my waist, holding me against him. There’s a soft dripping sound in the room.

His hips still. He turns my face to the side. He grins, ducks down, and presses a swift kiss to my lips, except that I need more and chase his mouth and his pierced tongue. Then Uri nibbles on my lower lip, the feel of his light beard rubbing my jaw makes me moan softly. When we finally break apart, his softening dick has slipped out of me. I feel sore, empty, but so damn satisfied.

Uri lifts my hand and leaves a sweet kiss on it before he cleans my body with some tissues and helps me get dressed. He's putting on his clothes when I hear it again.

"What's that sound?" I ask, looking around. Like a leaking faucet, but there's no sink in the office.

There's a box I hadn't noticed before, lying on the desk near my bag. From this angle, I can see a puddle of red forming on the bottom that turns my body instantly rigid. An ominous feeling grows inside my chest. The liquid is rolling down the high desk to the floor, making that dripping sound.

I incline my head to read the name on the box written in bold black letters. It's my name.

DR. SARIEL BEAR-STONE

The sensation of dread increases. Uri's fingers lace with mine as he pushes me slightly back. He takes out the switchblade, and without letting go of my hand, cuts the tape on top of the box. Two dead birds are inside. One has a broken neck, the other has its chest covered in blood—the crimson color looks so stark over the yellow, delicate feathers. It's horrible.

The note inside says, *Me and You. Us*.

Uri is already talking with Rami on the phone when my coat starts buzzing. I jump, not knowing how much time has passed with me staring at the heartbreaking sight. My afterglow is gone, replaced by horror and fear. I fumble to get my cell out, trying hard to erase that barbaric and vile vision from my mind.

UNKNOWN

I'll be seeing you again soon.

Again? Who is it? Is it the stalker? I suddenly feel eyes on me. I know it's an irrational thought triggered by fear and helplessness. I'm suddenly out of breath. Where did all the air go? I let go of my phone as my eyes turn unfocused. Am I going to die? Yes, yes I am. My body feels cold and rigid. Now I can't feel it anymore. The blood stopped flowing in my veins. No. I…

Blurry hazel eyes are suddenly in front of me. Large hands cup my face. Warmth. A voice buzzes in my ears. It becomes abruptly clear the next moment.

“I decide when you go, Sari.” Uri. An immense wave of relief washes over me, wetting my cheeks with tears.

“I own you. You’re mine.”

I nod, or I try to.

“Eyes on me. Stay awake and take my breaths in your lungs.” Mouth to mouth he gives me life again. “Yes, Baby Blue. That’s right, don’t fucking stop.”

When the panic attack abates, Uri wraps me in his jacket and, holding me in his arms bridal style, carries me to the car.

He doesn’t let me go. I’m on his lap, in the safety of his arms. My cheek is lying on his chest. I can hear his heart beating fast…from anger or maybe fear. My trembling hand is fisting his sweater, I’m scared he’ll let me go, unreasonably so. Tears are stuck inside my throat and intermittent shivers keep shaking my body.

“Talk to me,” I whisper brokenly. His deep voice always drags me back when I’m drowning in one of my panic attacks.

Just as I think he didn’t hear me, he asks, “Do you know why I bought our lake house?”

Did he say *our*?

“Because in spring, Baby Blue Eyes will bloom all around the property, and I want to see you standing in the middle of it all…again. I want you to look at me like you did that day and hear me say you belong to me, knowing this time you’ll understand the real meaning of it.”

I sigh. Every word he utters reaches my soul, latching around it, bonding me to him for eternity.

“That look of desolation on your face appeared in my dream that very night. Fearful, periwinkle eyes above pale cheeks. We were separated, as I ended

up in the group home and you at Meg’s house, barely seeing each other.”

“We were in no state to interact with other people,” I say softly.

His chin brushes over my head as he nods. “I’ve always been very rational, it’s an innate trait. A boy showing up in my dreams had no particular meaning. But you weren’t just any boy. You were mine, and you kept visiting my dreams for a month.”

“Is that why you started sneaking inside my room after that?” I ask. He’d walk fifteen minutes from the group home to Meg’s and slide under the broken wooden fence on the east side of the house every night for six months just to watch me fall sleep.

“That was just the tip of my obsession with you. Whoever this stalker is, they are amateurs. They have no idea who they are up against.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

# *eleven*

SARIEL

*They caught my stalker. They caught my stalker. They caught my stalker.* The statement keeps echoing inside my head as I enter the restaurant on hesitant feet. Only one bodyguard outside today since I'm with the others, and life keeps going.

I stayed shut away in the lake house, too scared to go outside, for almost a week. I dove into my work. I took the cowardly way out again—so much for not being the weak link in this family. But the memory of those lifeless, innocent birds almost triggered other panic attacks while the sensation of feeling exposed hasn't faded away.

It took only a day for Rami to find out who the stalker was. Two weeks prior to my lecture, new CCTV cameras were set up all over campus and also in the faculty lounge after two students from that university were found beaten and raped near Chicago. Nobody knew about the new security except for the dean of the university and his assistant, Dr. Dench. Rami found out about it when he hacked their emails to help Hunter who's working on the case with the police.

Margaret Smith. That's her name. My stalker was an intern working at Bear-Stone Labs, the same intern that Sandy kicked out of my lab more than a week ago. I shiver at the thought, now seeing that encounter in a completely different, dangerous, and creepy light.

Rami got her on the security footage entering the faculty lounge at the University of Illinois with that box in her hands thirty minutes before my lecture. After that, it was easy for Serena to locate her through facial recognition in the vicinity of all the places where the stalker left a package in the last month. After a very thorough background check, Rami discovered that she was also working as a volunteer in an emergency room. That is how she got a hold of the muscle relaxant that killed the guard, which is usually used in hospitals to relax the respiratory muscles before intubating patients.

She was at my lecture that day, and the timeline on the footage confirmed she left the box in the lounge before going to the lecture hall.

After that, she didn't come to work again. The address she'd given Bear-Stone Labs HR was bogus, but my brothers managed to find her after four days. They got her outside my apartment building and took her to the base. I went too. I didn't want to kill her, just maybe find out why she was so obsessed with me. That's when I discovered my family kept crucial information from me.

I was sent another package before, which contained a ball gag with a hair that led them to Francis Moreland's kidnapping. I finally comprehended why Uri didn't like the idea of me going to the university alone that day and his strong insistence regarding the four bodyguards.

The fact that he, that all of them didn't share such important information upsets me deeply. Lori, Michael, and Ollie wanted to tell me, but as usual, the rest decided to treat me like a kid. And Uri… Panic attacks or not, I deserved to know. We've been arguing for two days straight now. I'm tired of being kept in the dark. I'll continue feeling pushed aside, defenseless, and powerless like this. Which I'm not. I can protect myself. There's a reason I am part of this family. I might not be as bloodthirsty and ruthless as my brothers, but I'm strong and determined. And I have the highest IQ.

I was ready to show Uri how forceful I can be, but he didn't try to stop me from seeing Margaret when I arrived at the base. Even though I quickly found out she suffers from obsessive love disorder, a condition in which one person feels an overwhelming desire to possess another—in this case me—and inability to accept rejection. Michael also talked about delusional and

borderline personality disorders, while Raph called her a *Fatal Attraction* sicko bitch after Margaret expressed her desire to kill me and herself. Uri telling her he is my boyfriend only made it worse.

She had to die, I know that. She killed one man and kidnapped another—that we know of. But I just couldn't watch as Uri took care of it. It's still scary to think how easily she managed to get close to me and how, even though she made me feel slightly uneasy, I didn't feel in danger near her.

This whole predicament left a permanent chill inside my bones. Like I have eyes on me everywhere I go. The fact that I've been arguing with Uri doesn't help. Getting out of the lake house was my way of letting go of all those dark, clingy feelings.

I've just arrived at one of Uri's restaurants to help prepare for Sully's going away party which will coincide with his birthday. He'll leave in two weeks for college, and Lori wants to celebrate both occasions. I don't see Lori or Ollie anywhere, though. But the restaurant door is unlocked, and I can see boxes on the floor with party decorations. They must be somewhere. Maybe in the back.

"You shouldn't be here! This was supposed to be a surprise," I hear Lori whining a moment before the swinging kitchen doors part.

"You and my brother talked about it at home while I was there. Plus, I saw the balloons in Brad's car when he picked me up the other day and my twentieth birthday is coming up soon," Sully replies with a snorting laugh, showing his crooked incisor—I haven't seen much of in the last months. His eyes, one brown, one light green, are shining with mirth. His glasses are a bit askew on his long nose, which reminds me of his clumsiness. I've never met a person more unaware of his body and his surroundings than Sully.

"You bloody eavesdropper, and your bestie, Brad is a himbo." Lori lets go of the door, which swings back, hitting Sully in his lanky chest.

"Oomph!" he gasps.

"You okay?" I ask him.

He raises his hand in a placating gesture. "Yes."

“*He* is okay, but I’m not!” Lori states, all bratty like. “Mr. Cake Face here wasn’t supposed to know about the surprise going away/birthday party for him. I’m so bloody pissed.”

“I’m touched, really. But this wasn’t necessary.” Sully moves toward the bathroom, followed by an annoyed Lori. I go too, since I need to wash my hands.

“Exactly my point, Sully-doo. You wouldn’t have expected a party for both, and I wanted to see the elation, the joy, and gratefulness in your teary eyes when you saw us all gathered to surprise you.”

“Isn’t it the thought that counts?” I hazard, as we enter the large bathroom.

Sully’s untied shoe makes him trip, he stumbles and barely finds his balance again, gripping the teal counter near the sinks.

Lori crouches down to tie Sully’s shoe. “Please, that’s just something people say to be nice, like size doesn’t matter, or I’m on a diet, or you look fabulous in that speedo. Ugh!”

“Is this bitch act going to go on much longer? I thought the point was to make me elated.” Sully disappears inside one of the stalls, banging the door behind him, as I move toward the first sink on the right.

“Ungrateful imp!” Lori stops near me to fix the black eyeliner at the corner of his eye.

“Let’s just get started.” I dry my hands on the small champagne towel—this place is really posh. “Where’s Ollie?”

“In the kitchen with the chef. You should leave your coat at the entrance.” He waves at my white Chesterfield coat before letting out a high-pitched shriek. He frantically jumps behind me and yanks my body in front of him as a shield.

“What the hell is happening?” I hear Sully from inside the stall.

I can’t reply. Lori is acting like a drowning cat, trembling and clawing at my clothes. I wince when he jerks me back, almost making me lose my

balance and topple over with his leg hooked around my waist and arms almost strangling me.

I’m not at my best. My body is stiff and exhausted. The fight with Uri over the last two days has intermittent, erotic pauses, in which he tried to affirm his dominance over me with his hands and mouth and dick. My body is covered in his marks, and my hole has been pummeled and filled and forced open more times than I can count. I did submit to him; it’s almost against my nature not to, but I didn’t let him win since we are still arguing. Now Lori’s crazy, manhandling maneuvers are not helping with the physical aches.

“A demon!” Lori screams in my left ear, turning it deaf. “Hideous creature, stay away!”

His polished green nail is pointing somewhere around the long, rectangular mirror hanging over the sinks. I narrow my eyes as I see something black moving along the sharp edge.

“You mean the spider?”

“Don’t kill it!” I hear Sully’s voice from the stall.

“Don’t care about your Steve Irwin oath!” Lori hisses, forming a cross with his index fingers to point them at the spider. “It’s a mutant creature. He’ll bite me, but instead of turning into Spider-Man, I’ll become an incubator for his slimy, rotten eggs.”

“I’m feeling sick,” I murmur, as Sully comes out, running an exasperated hand through his dark hair.

“It’s the size of a nickel,” Sully scolds him, lifting the piece of toilet paper he’s holding.

“I’ll just die of fright then. No biggie, you tosser!” Lori keeps complaining. “I’ve got goosebumps all over me.”

“It’s called horripilation, the bristling from fear or cold. The adrenaline stimulates your tiny muscles to pull on the roots of your hairs, making them stand out from your skin. That distorts the skin, causing bumps to form,” I try to distract him.

Sully nods as he finally catches the spider in the toilet paper. “Charles Darwin once investigated goose bumps by scaring zoo animals with a stuffed snake.”

“Don’t try to razzle-dazzle me with useless facts; action counts. Let’s put the fun in funeral and flush the eight-eyed monster down the toilet!”

“How is that fun?” Sully asks with a serious expression.

“And why do you always want to flush things?” He wanted to do the same to Albert E.

“Watching the alien drowning in filthy toilet water until it is sucked the fuck out of here…fun. Seeing the disapproval on your faces…boring.”

“It would be even more fun when he comes back up and bites your ass!” Sully takes the spider near the small window and gently shakes the toilet paper until it crawls outside.

“Your words flew inside my ear, my brain feigned processing, I let them go out of the other ear, and poof, forgotten.” He flips Sully off.

“Sari, you try telling him a little spider is not going to kill him.”

“It’s a phobia, Lori. I think you can overcome it if you try,” I gently explain. He dismounts me, making me wince again when his arm rubs over my inflamed nipple—Uri sucked on it until I screamed his name.

“Says the guy who left his apartment for a bunch of little mice.” Lori scoffs at me.

“They were rats,” I remind him, and technically Uri was the one who insisted on me moving out.

“I mean you have one as a pet, and your manipulative as fuck boyfriend released those rats in the first place, so I’m sure they didn’t carry any disea —” Lori abruptly stops talking as I spin my head his way.

“What did you just say?” I breathe out, while his face fills with an emotion I’ve never seen on him: guilt.

“Fuck!” Sully cusses, looking wide-eyed at Lori and then me.

“You said Uri infested my apartment with rats.” I grit my teeth as I spit the words out. It can’t be true, can it?

“The building…not the apartment,” Lori spills. *Oh my God.*

“Stop talking.” Sully moves a hand over his face.

“Why? Why would Uri…? To force me to move in with him.” To keep a close eye on me. He even wanted me to sell it. An apartment he didn’t want me to buy in the first place.

“Come on, Angel. Didn’t you suspect anything?” Lori asks. “I mean, it wasn’t the first time Uri… Okay, those three glasses of margarita mixed with the spider assault might have broken my brain.”

*Not the first time?*

“It was broken already,” Sully mutters.

“What else did he do? Lori, tell me now!” I demand.

“Sheesh, you’re scary when you get all stern.” He takes a step back.

“What is going on?” Ollie walks into the bathroom with a frown on his face. Can he feel the heaviness in the room? “What the hell are you all doing in the bathroom?”

“The cat is out of the bag. I repeat, the cat is out of the bag,” Lori recites.

“You know too? About Uri’s maneuvers? Everybody knows?” This is getting worse by the second.

“I didn’t.” Sully raises his hand. One person.

“I wanted to tell you,” Ollie utters, using a soothing tone, which doesn’t work on me. “But then the stalker appeared, and I didn’t want to add to the pile. I’m sorry.”

“If I may, I think that he sabotaged all your relationships and acted all twisted and sociopathic because he was desperate to not lose you.” I don’t know if Lori is trying to defend him or dig him a deeper grave.

I suddenly get the comprehensive meaning of his words, and all my hackles go up as the air hangs thick with nauseating uncertainty. Sabotaged my relationships? The way things happened to the men I tried to date, the disappearances, the sudden work transfers, the triggered fire alarm with no fire in the building…oh my God. Was that all Uri? Has he been meddling in my life? Did I step right into his meticulously prepared trap when I moved in with him? Like a fly in a spiderweb.

Looking back, I can see that the relationship between me and Uri has been more than a little unorthodox. His lack of boundaries and my dependency for both emotional and physical needs was a little odd by society's standards, but I've never once looked at it with a critical eye. Nevertheless, undermining my fragile confidence, letting me feel inadequate and lacking, that hurts me deeply. He's been scheming behind my back, regardless of the consequences, of how it would affect me, moving me like a chess piece, following his tunnel vision in order to get me. He treated me just like he does all the rest of the world. That's a slap to the face that I don't enjoy.

I dial Uri's phone number under the worried gaze of my friends.

When he picks up I ask, "Is it true? Did you orchestrate my life… surreptitiously?"

There's a heavy silence before he says in a low tone, "Does it matter?"

"Yes. Yes, it does," I reply, squeezing my eyes shut.

"And if the answer is yes?"

"No." Is the only word coming out of my mouth, riding a soft breath. I hoped, so much, to hear his denial. "You messed with my head and maneuvered me as you pleased. Made me think I wasn't enough for my dates!"

"They weren't enough for you," he hisses.

"You manipulative bastard!" Conceited. Controlling. Conniving jerk! Wetting my dry lips with my tongue, I try to breathe shallowly.

"Is that my pet name?"

“Is this a joke to you?” I accuse him, my arm slipping to my side.

“A joke?” His voice gets even lower. “Do you know how hard I’ve worked to keep you safe?”

“Safe? You meant to keep me for yourself!” I counter.

He chuckles arrogantly. “Yes! I’ve been pulling strings in the background. I threatened and bribed and sent those fuckers away. I changed and modified all my priorities so you’d feel at ease. I forced and pushed you onto the path I wanted. Everything I’ve done was for you.”

“Ngh.” A defeated sound leaves my lips. No matter how many times I tell my heart to stay still, I can’t help my feelings from overflowing. Betrayal, confusion, incredulity, sorrow. Why? What am I to him? A toy he can control, play with, and discard whenever he feels like it?

“Losing you is not an option, Baby Blue. Stop fighting this. You know who I am, better than anyone else.” *But I thought I finally knew who I was for you, and now I found out I was wrong.*

Even as I finally witness the ugly depths of his obsession, I feel the innate urge to yield to him. To crawl to him, into his arms—the profound need claws at my insides. I want to roll and rub all over his chest until I stink of him. The memory of his scent turns my head fuzzy. He smells like everything beautiful and safe in the world. But that same scent just soured into deceitfulness, insidiousness. Sadness.

“I pushed you away, but you kept me at distance all our lives. If I wasn’t into S&M, what would you have done? Kept me locked up, sabotaged all my relationships while still going to fuck your…*men* at Madame Claudette’s!” I cry out. “Our relationship has always been unbalanced. And now I discover you took over my life.” My cheeks are quickly turning wet as tears continue flowing. Why do I always cry?

“What do you want from me, Sari?” The lack of understanding and compassion in his tone makes my gut twist painfully.

Questions I can never bring myself to ask—too scared of his answers—well up inside my throat and then fade away like bubbles in the wind.

“What do I want?” I echo his words. “Apology comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which means to give a speech in defense, and contrite from the Latin word *conterere*, which means to feel crushed with guilt.”

“The only thing irrevocably mine in this world is you, Sari. Your love, your quirkiness, your cluelessness, your inner strength, your sexy body. All of you. I won’t apologize or feel contrite for making you mine. I can’t. It would be a lie,” he deadpans.

I know sociopaths can’t. That wasn’t what I needed to hear. Not even close to what I’d hoped to hear.

I end the call, not wanting to continue anymore. I throw my phone in one of the sinks with too much force.

“Blimey! Mummy just slapped daddy at the dinner table.” Lori’s loud whisper is followed by an “ouch.” “Sorry.” He massages the area on his forearm where Ollie pinched him as he looks at me. “Sometimes my mouth has a mouth of its own.”

I don’t say anything to him. I’m feeling too angry.

Ollie interjects, “Since I became part of this family I’ve seen how Uri is with you. Rague told me that he’s always been like that about you, damn everything and everyone else. He won’t change, Sari. You, on the other hand, need to decide if you can accept it, him just as he is.”

Am I really that different compared to all the other people he’s manipulated? The fact that I’m more hurt by the thought of being relegated to the masses than by the fact that he meddled in my life says a lot.

My phone starts ringing as I wipe my cheeks. I turn my back to it. I need the perspective of distance and time. I need some cold air inside my lungs.

“We’ll be here,” I hear Sully’s soft voice as I make my way to the emergency exit in the back and out into the parking lot.

Winter awaits me outside. It snowed yesterday. The sun has been shining since this morning, leaving Chicago in white, sparkly patches. It’s still chilly. I’m glad I didn’t take off my coat when I arrived, since I thoughtlessly left my phone and everything else inside.

I hear a laugh, and when I look up, I see two women strolling nearby. My heart feels like a candle flickering in the cold wind, but all around, the world keeps steadily moving. I'm the only one caught up in the storm while everybody else is busy living their lives.

My thoughts are scattered. I walk around the building, my mind focused on what Uri did, trying to discover what else he engineered to steer my life the way he wanted. Did he force that college professor of physics, Dr. Fassenberg, to revisit my paper the time I failed his exam? I've always found it odd how quickly the professor reconsidered after he vehemently turned down my plea. Did Uri have something to do with the cute neighbor who used to live in my building and his sudden move, two days after inviting me over for coffee? How about Trent? No, he barely recognized Uri when he saw him at the university. But maybe Uri worked his schemes behind the curtain. Trent, too, suddenly moved to another city. We did lose contact before that, though.

Holy hell! I can't overanalyze every single event in my life, I'll turn mad. I already knew quite well how controlling and determined Uri is. He held me steady when I was weak, unstable, and faltering. He reassured me when doubts overwhelmed me and stayed with me when I didn't want to be alone. I've always felt that what I received from him was greater than what I gave him. But I was unaware how far overboard he went.

I'm such a doormat.

I suddenly lose my balance as a heavy body shoves me against a wall. I hit the side of my head hard, and for a moment, I only see a white light. The pain wakes up all my pleasure cells until I hear a growly male voice. It's like a cold shower putting off all the flames.

"Don't fucking move," the stranger whispers in my ear.

I yell at the top of my lungs, but the hard slap I get from the man stops my screaming voice, forcing the side of my head against the wall again. My brain quickly processes the slap, and agonizing pain erupts over my cheek. The throb is somehow pleasant, but the fear overcomes any other sensation.

When I open my eyes again, I get my first sight of the guy. Bald, big, scarred. I stand no chance against him, a man twice my size pointing a gun

at me. Still, a few bruises are nothing in comparison to what other horror surely awaits me as he drags me toward a black car. I survived all those years of imprisonment alone, and I promised myself that I'd never let anybody else cage me without a fight. He shoves me into the back seat as I keep screaming, kicking, clawing, and punching, twisting my body like an eel.

"Who are you?" I scream. "Let me go!"

"Make him shut up!" the driver yells as the bald guy presses the cold, hard muzzle of his gun against my aching cheek while grabbing my jaw in his massive hand.

"You little bitch, shut the fuck up!" he roars. Spits hits my face, and I clench my teeth, feeling my heart inside my throat.

What is going on? I don't know these men. Who do they work for? What do they want with me? Kidnapping a person in daylight is risky and stupid. Were they waiting for me outside the restaurant? Why?

I let one of the questions slip out, "Where are you taking me?" I hate how my voice breaks.

"I told you to keep him quiet!" the driver barks at the bald guy, who removes the gun from my face as he replies to him. I take that moment to pull the handle on the car door, but it's locked, the window as well. So I throw myself at the driver with all the ferocity of my fear…and without a concrete plan. The car swerves before a single punch to my jaw from the bald guy pushes me back against the seat. My world spins. My head smacks against the window, and tears stream down my cheeks.

The buildings on the side of the road pass by at alarming speed. I open my mouth to yell, but nothing comes out. My head rings from the hit, and pain pulses where I've been punched. I can taste blood inside my mouth—my masochistic side is smirking while the rest of me wants to give back double the pain. I close my eyes as a sudden sense of fatigue settles in, sinking deep into my limbs.

Uri's face is the last thing I think about before blackness descends; I try hard to fight it and fail.

The first thing I feel is that my mind is here, but my body isn’t. Weird. Then the sensation in my legs registers. My torso. Crap, my head hurts. It takes me a little longer to swim back to the surface. I blink my eyes open; it’s dark outside the window. A floor lamp on the opposite side of the room illuminates my surroundings.

Colors start to pop out at me now that my vision has adjusted to the artificial light. Wooden walls, a bed, a glass table. I’m in a bedroom. I blink again. I’m sitting on a chair, my hands bound behind my back with a thick rope. Given the complete lack of feeling in them, I suspect I’ve been like this for a while. I try to twitch my fingers, which feels damn painful as blood starts flowing again.

My feet are similarly numb, I can’t feel the boots on them, but they aren’t tied.

I attempt to remember what happened, but my mind comes up blank. I twist my hands, testing the ropes. I might need to dislocate a wrist to get out of them—a trick I was forced to learn when I was imprisoned. The pain will be indescribably intense, but I need to get out of here.

A few details I’d missed start to seep into my consciousness. The silky sheets on the bed, the bottle of lube on the table, and the bloody bat leaning on the wall in the corner. The room smells sweet, vanilla sweet, which is pleasant, considering the situation.

Memories of the bald guy and the driver abruptly sneak up inside my head. I must have passed out in the car. They are not here, but that doesn’t mean they’re far away. Whoever they are. Why did they bring me here? Where is here? And what’s with the creepy porno set?

I’m not wearing my coat—they must have taken it—and I don’t have my phone. No! I left it at the restaurant. It’s okay. The tracker implanted behind my ear will tell my family my location and the bracelet on my wrist that I’m

still alive. Rami must have alerted Uri to my disappearance by now. I know he'll come for me.

The ache in my head increases. I still need to do something. I can't just wait for my brothers to find me. I'm strong and capable—I'm the son of Linda and Meg, the bravest and most badass women I've ever met.

Taking a deep breath, I count to three and twist. A crack and then searing pain envelops my left wrist. I stifle a piercing scream by gritting my teeth, letting a few seconds go by before I slide my hand out the rope. Now for the worst part. I need to reset the joint. A sharp tug, and this time, I'm unable to keep a low whimper inside.

The cold shiver down my body is replaced by a blazing, scorchingly, agonizing sensation. Sweat beads over my lip as I gasp, and my eyes roll back. My fingers tighten around the rope until I feel it biting into my palm, praying that it will keep me focused and prevent me from passing out again.

I don't know how much time passes. My wrist throbs, but I'm free. I have the rope in one hand as I touch the side of my neck behind my ear with the other. I feel the little bump where the tracker is, unscathed. Thank Goddess. Still, I better prepare myself for the worst.

Voices reach the room, distant, barely audible over the pounding of my heart and jarring breaths.

I slowly stand up, shaking my weak legs before going to the door, I place an ear on the wooden surface and listen. Men's voices again, footsteps moving away and then a door closing. As I expected the handle doesn't move, the door is locked, the window as well. I could use the bat to break the glass, but the strong noise could attract undesired attention. Same thing for the door. Now I regret not letting Ren teach me how to pick locks.

I look around the room for something to use as a weapon. I find a pair of scissors in the small nightstand drawer among condoms, huge dildos, and other disturbing sex implements. I grab the scissors and hurriedly go back to the chair. I push my hands behind my back to hide the weapon and the loose rope, waiting for my kidnappers to show.

I’m not defenseless anymore, but my muscles ache from the unnatural position, and the acrid, bitter scent of fear is heavy inside my nostrils.

I feel the warning of a panic attack just before the drowning sensation hits me. Goosebumps rise on my arms, and I start shivering. My sight turns blurry as terror constricts my chest and worms its way into me, clawing at my insides. My body is frozen as I fight to get some air in. Am I really going to die here?

Uri’s face is again in front of my eyes. His soothing whispers, confident gaze, and warm lips. I whimper, desperate to move, but my body doesn’t want to cooperate. *Stay with me*, Uri’s baritone voice echoes inside my mind. *You know this feeling. It’s terrifying. It feels like death but not. Let yourself breathe. Let yourself…be. You can’t give up; it’s not your choice to make. I won’t let you.*

Tears run free as a strange sense of calm overcomes me, washing away the suffocating panic. I suck in air, feeling it fill my lungs to maximum capacity. My eyes open as the sun starts peaking on the horizon. I curl my fingers around the scissors and the rope, relieved to feel them still in my hands. I hear voices again; they sound a little closer now but they are coming from my left now. There’s multiple people out there, what if they come in here all together?

A loud bang, bang followed by two heavy thuds and another bang makes me jump in the chair. Gun shots.

The following silence rings in my ears until a door nearby screeches open. My stomach tightens with dread. The unknown of it all is killing me. I hear the click of a lock, and then the bedroom door slowly moves until I can clearly see the person walking inside.

*What the hell is he doing here?*

“Surprised to see me, darling?”

My lips part, but nothing comes out. Trent. As in my ex-fling, Trent is standing in front of me. He doesn’t seem to be here to save me, judging by the crazy, excited look in his eyes and the relaxed way he slowly prowls inside the room.

“Trent, what’s going on?”

He walks toward me, stopping near the table. He drops a gun and a bloody knife on the glass surface. Then he takes out a napkin from his jacket and starts wiping off his fingers. He must have been the one shooting. Did he kill someone?

“I saved you,” he finally replies.

*Saved me*? I’d believe that if he had tried to untie me. He’s sporting a disturbing smirk I’ve never seen before on his face. His leery gaze doesn’t leave me for a second as he keeps wiping the blood from his hands.

“You can’t hide your resplendence, not even bruised and bound to a chair.” The amazement dripping from his words makes me sweat with anxiety and uneasiness. A lot of uneasiness.

“Why am I here, Trent?”

“If you want to find something, you have to stop looking,” he recites a Zen koan. “Well I cheated a little, but who cares!” He curls the corners of his lips up in what I can only describe as a hungry smile. He takes another step toward me—still too far for me to do anything. My muscles stiffen and I brace myself. My fingers turn sweaty around the scissors’ handle.

He doesn’t advance further. “We are mentally and spiritually bonded, darling.”

Oh God, can this be possible? To have another obsessed freak in my life.? I could do the math but I know the possibilities are scarce. Trent seems a little unstable. He was good at hiding this side of him from me when we briefly dated. Otherwise, how did I not see it when we went out?

I am strangely calm, given the situation. My blood feels like ice, and I refuse to flinch as he comes closer. I faced death head on many times as a kid and have witnessed many lives come to an end in the last seven years. I thought I felt kind of indifferent toward death. But my breath is coming in sharp pants, and I might pee myself very soon.

“My brothers will find me,” I state. My voice is trembling…with confidence.

I clearly see the change on his face. Fury possesses his features, making his eyes blaze with it. “Your faith is misplaced, darling.”

“Faith is an irrational belief in something that is impossible. I know what my family can do. They’ll come.” My tracker will lead them right to me.

“Are you expecting that perverted brother of yours? Oh, dear.” His face morphs into an evil expression. “You see, I paid him a visit.” His hand suddenly brushes my aching jaw, right where I was punched.

I force my body to stay still, even though his touch feels revolting. He’s close enough now for the scissors to do some damage, but I need to know what happened to Uri. I have an ominous feeling about it; Trent looks too pleased with himself.

“After the way he treated me, I needed to tell him how rude he’d conducted himself—I’m a professor after all, teaching is what I do. I needed to get it through his thick head, and I surely did…with my baseball bat. Did you know I played some ball in college?”

My eyes fall to the bloody wooden bat lying against the wall, and I gasp as I put the pieces together.

“No,” I let out on a breath.

“It was incredibly easy, and the crack I heard when I hit him…ahhh.”

It can’t be. Everything turns dark for a moment, like my brain, body, and heart are suffering a temporary blackout.

“I’ll never forget that sweet sound.” His blackhearted words and those predatory, lecherous eyes make me want to run and shut him up at the same time. “So much blood, though.”

“I don’t believe you!” I suddenly scream. Tears well up, but I don’t let them fall. All I’m doing is crying lately. I’m sick of it. Anger is a much better way to vent. Because Uri is alive. I won’t believe otherwise, I can’t. I’ll break down if…

His hand suddenly swings down. The smack resounds in the room as my face snaps to the side from the force of the slap. “Your disgusting brother is

dead. Now there's only me, and you'll do as I say, or you will end up like the others."

*The others?*

His finger rubs the side of my mouth before he sucks on the drop of blood on the tip. I hear a whimper, and soon realize it's coming from me. The pain makes my body tingle and stokes the fire inside me…ready to scorch the crazy bastard in front of me.

"I'm going to eat you up from head to toe, darling." His hand moves to his belt, and he starts to unbuckle it. A nauseating feeling forms inside my stomach.

"You'll forget about him in no time. You'll scream my name when—"

A loud bang from outside cuts him off mid-sentence, like something hitting the roof. He turns his attention to the door, and that's the distraction I need. I raise the scissors over my head and stab him with them as I swing the rope in the air, watching the thick knot at the end hit him right in the face.

He grunts in pain and takes a step backward. I jump up and slap both my hands on his ears to disorient him—Linda's training is still vivid in my mind. Then I hold his head and knee him in the guts—Lori taught me something too.

I've never considered myself bloodthirsty, but I want to see the man who hurt Uri pay for what he's done. I want to crush him, pulverize him, make him cry like a baby.

As traitorous tears spill out, I grab the scissors still poking out of his shoulder and yank them out as my booted foot pushes against his groin. Trent yells as he loses his balance and falls back on the glass table. His weight and gravity do the rest; pieces of shattered glasses fly in every direction as he drops on the floor. The gun that was on top of the table rolls near my feet, and I grab it as I let go of the rope.

Taking the safety off, I point it at his face, and I'm on him again before he can move. I start kicking him on his sides, his chest, his dick. "Uri is not my brother! He's the love of my life, you sicko bastard!" I growl, letting out all my pent-up wrath and fear and sorrow.

*Uri is fine. Uri is fine.* I keep repeating it to myself as I continue beating the fucker up. I impale his hand with the scissors and hear him wail. Before he can cover his face, I press the sole of my boot to his cheek and twist it in a way that would make a person choke with nausea.

“Pray he’s fine, or I’ll kill you like the piece of shit you are,” I pant, giving his face a last stomp with the heel of my boot.

After knocking him out, I give myself a moment to breathe, then I check his pockets. No phone. No car keys. I turn to the door and rush out of the bedroom into the living room. I glance quickly around: a small kitchen, a sofa, and a TV. I don’t want to stay inside this cottage a moment longer; I need to get out of here and find a way to contact Uri, to make sure he’s okay.

I bolt outside. All I can see are white trees. I can’t feel the cold with all the adrenaline rushing through my veins. The sun is rising, and there’s no visible trail I can follow. Damn it! I need to get to Uri. I need to see he’s okay. The sound of water makes me turn to my left. It’s a stream. If I follow it downhill, my chances of finding a road or a trail might increase.

Hearing a noise behind me, I start running, tripping over branches, pine needles whipping at my eyes. I nearly fall face-first onto the snowy ground and catch myself at the last moment on a branch—the rough bark scratches my palm, and my wrist screams in agony. I’m panting, my breaths raspy. The air is cold, but the breaths I’m swallowing are hot.

“Sariel,” someone calls my name from behind me. I grit my teeth and fight against the terror invading my body. The bald guy and the driver are still out there.

I spin around, lift the gun, and aim it at the figure walking slowly toward me. For a second, I think it is Uri, and my heart stops beating. But the more I look, the more I sense that there’s something wrong. The way he walks is too stiff. His shoulders are too wide. And there’s not even a single flap of butterfly wings in my belly as he comes closer. There’s only one explanation: the man approaching me is Ezra.

“Take some deep breaths, you’re running out of oxygen.” His voice is deeper and raspier than Uri’s. His eyes slightly darker and colder as he halts

a few feet away from me.

The resemblance is uncanny. But I can easily see all the little differences in the wider nose, rounder lips, mole-less cheek. A fine stubble travels the ridge of his too angular jaw. His expression is unreadable, his demeanor calm and collected.

I keep my gun up as I utter his name. “What are you doing here?” He can’t have been in cahoots with Trent. Could he?

“I was outside the restaurant when you were kidnapped. I followed you here.”

That’s plausible since Ezra likes to watch us for some weird reason. But I’m still suspicious. “Then why didn’t you come to help me?”

Was he the one who helped me escape by throwing something on the cottage’s roof?

“You didn’t need it. You were more than capable of getting out of the situation by yourself.” *Situation*? Does he mean my kidnapping? His blatant statement is actually a breath of fresh air, but at the same time, so annoying.

“The guy in the cottage is out of it, and the other two are dead,” he adds.

He must have gone inside after I left.

“I couldn’t understand why my brother wanted to own a person so…fragile. Now I know that’s just appearances.”

“You were testing me?” I feel strangely pleased and deeply pissed. I was manhandled, kidnapped, and tied to a very uncomfortable chair by a crazy ex, and instead of helping me, Ezra just decided to see how the *situation* would develop.

“You’re a fucking psychopath,” I mutter, reminding myself what that entails. “Give me your phone.”

Of course, he doesn’t oblige. “I already contacted Uri. He should be here soon.”

I frown at him. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“You don’t.” He shrugs.

My foot suddenly slips as I take a step back. Ezra instantly appears a couple of inches from me and grabs my arm, holding me up. The gun’s muzzle is against his chest now, but he doesn’t seem disturbed by it. Instead he smirks.

“You are as clumsy as a baby with no motor skills.”

“I just escaped from a kidnapping!” I retort with irritation.

“Who hasn’t in this…family?” It reminds me he was once imprisoned as well, just like the rest of us—much longer than us.

He lets me go to reach his hand inside the pocket of his dark green hoodie.

“Slowly!” I order him, pushing the gun against his body more firmly.

He does as I say—still smirking like a lunatic—and pulls out a box of… Band-Aids. “You know I can take that weapon out of your hand in less than a second,” he deadpans, opening the box.

Can he? He’s an assassin for hire, so he probably can. I hesitantly lower the pistol, still keeping it in my hand.

“How did you know I wasn’t Uriel?” he asks as he removes the backing papers from the Band-Aid’s adhesive side.

I look into his eyes again, and I don’t see any kind of murderous intention in them, only emptiness. It makes me shudder.

“You have a whole different aura. And Uri would never wear these clothes.” I look at the red bandana around his forehead half covered by the hoodie with a snake on the sleeve and his beige cargo pants.

Distracted by my survey, I let him place the red Band-Aid with a black heart carefully drawn on it over my cheek. I’ve been jealous of him since Uri told us about his existence. I hated the fact that he kept Ezra as a secret, or the idea of Uri having another special person in his life, a brother bonded to him by blood. But I understand now how petty of me that was.

“Why are you helping me?” I ask suddenly. Psychopaths don’t do anything unless there’s something to gain from it.

“Why Uriel?” He answers with another question not pertinent to what happened in the slightest. “Of all the other foster brothers, why him?”

I stare at his face. That’s a peculiar question. Is he testing me again?

Movement from behind Ezra makes me suddenly freeze. Then I do a double take when I see him. All my fear and anger drain away at the mere sight of him.

He’s alive. Uri. Uri. Uri. Dear God, he’s here and so beautiful, the rising sun is dancing along his figure as he stalks through the woods toward us, like flames shimmering all round him. The dry blood on his forehead and in his hair trailing down his beige sweater makes me gasp with dread, but his steps are steady and forceful.

He’s alive.

“Uri!” I sob. Relief crashes into me, making me shudder. I want to run to him, but my arms and legs don’t seem to work. Our eyes lock, then he lets his trail down my body. I feel like I’m being touched all over by his gaze.

I know the answer to Ezra’s question. Not loving Uri would have been impossible. He is me, as I am him. Seven plus Four equals one.

I can see his face more clearly now. His features are twisted in fury and what I think is…fear. For me. He’s come for me. My teeth are chattering now. I’m probably in shock or dealing with an adrenaline crash. I feel shaky and cold and a little out of it.

“I thought you were… Trent said he…” I can’t even finish a single phrase. I feel the gun slipping through my fingers as my body abruptly lets go.

His strong, soothing scent envelopes me first, then his warmth, making my toes curl. He moves until we collide. My face is against his chest as he buries his nose in my hair. It’s not a dream. I breathe in, my senses going into overdrive. I’m swallowing huge gulps of his scent, pushing them deep down inside my lungs, never wanting to let anything about him go. It’s

olfactory bliss. A moan leaves my lips when strong, unforgiving arms wrap around me and squeeze me tightly.

Uri, Uri, Uri. Whatever we were arguing about before loses all meaning.

“Baby Blue.” The sheer relief in those two words sends a shiver through me.

“Shh,” Uri whispers into my ear, stroking my back soothingly. Possessively. “I’m here.”

I nearly purr, leaning into his touch. But then with a strangled growl, he suddenly drops to his knees. His face sinks into my chest. His arms pulls me in close, the hold shy of painful. In this position, I see more clearly the blood covering his head and dreads, and I can’t hold back a sob.

He is safe. He is alive.

“I’m ok,” I whisper, as he groans menacingly against my pec. He nods his head against me and holds me for…I have no idea how long.

Reality soon comes rushing back in when I hear a tsk, and I remember Ezra’s presence behind us. I try to turn to look at him, but Uri only holds me tighter.

His head tilts back, and our eyes lock again like two universes crashing and blending into one. My whole life has led up to this moment.

“I love you. I’ve always loved you so much, forever,” I brokenly whisper.

He just stares. My gut burns with adoration for him.

“Don’t scare me like you did today ever again. I’ll leave this earth and follow you into the afterlife if I have to.” The hissed promise penetrates my heart, finding its eternal place.

I squeeze my eyes, emotion heavy in my throat. I can’t stop smiling as I bring our mouths together. As soon as our lips touch, the desperation lifts off my shoulders. His tongue teases inside my mouth and twines with mine as he straightens up, towering over me, gathering me so close that not an inch of space is left between us. He kisses me until I can’t breathe, my lungs turn hot. All the pain and fear a faraway memory.

He finally tears his mouth away and pushes his head back, leaving my lips deliciously throbbing.

His fingers brush against the Band-Aid on my cheek. “It’s just a graze,” I try to reassure him, although it doesn’t seem to work.

“What else?” he asks with a grim look in his eyes.

“Nothing else,” I sort of lie. My boyfriend is bellicose as it is; I don’t want to fuel him.

“You have a bruise on your jaw and blood caked on your forehead.” He stops and growls. “Your tracker didn’t work. We couldn’t find you.” He turns my head to the side to inspect the area behind my ear.

Shit! Thank God Ezra followed me.

I choose my words carefully, not wanting Uri to turn berserk. “My head hit a wall and a car window, but the tracker should be fine.”

He roars, “Motherfucker!”

“Uri.” I grab his face with both hands, using my most soothing tone. But I’m angry too as I see the blood on his dreads. “How about your—?”

Uri interrupts me by hauling me into another kiss, rough and passionate, claiming me with his mouth. When he pulls back, my bruised lips burn in the cold air, and my head falls to the side against his hand. I can only huddle into him. Because everything about him is perfect, from his caramel dreads and large hands to his tattooed body and the faint lines at the corners of his piercing eyes.

“I’m fine, Baby Blue, since I won’t let you out of my sight ever again.” That sounds like a sweet threat. The sweetest I’ve ever heard.

Which reminds me… “My being kidnapped by a mentally unstable ex is not going to stop us from talking about your lies and over-the-top controlling behavior,” I state. My voice is weak, but my resolution is strong.

He grits his teeth. “Don’t mention that fucker ever again if you want me to stay sane,” he hisses.

This is going to be a toughie.

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# twelve

URIEL

I’m fearless, nothing has ever thrown or shaken me…except fucking Sari. He cranks up my protectiveness to a homicidal level. And I’m going to have my bloody revenge.

Trent the fucker Dohner.

My head is fucking killing me. That damn coward had the audacity to hit me while I gave him my back in an alley outside one of my cafés. I’d just received the message from Ezra saying Sari had been taken by two thugs to the woodlands around Tonica—a small town approximately two hours from Chicago—and the fucker took advantage of it. He left me for dead in that alley, but I was only out cold for half an hour. Rague and Rami found me, and we drove here together to get Sari.

Rami found out Trent was behind it. First, his aunt had a small property near Tonica, and second, Serena linked the two thugs who took Sari away to him. The AI located them in a diner with Trent sliding a suspicious envelope their way. If I’d known he was the shithead behind the kidnapping, I’d have ended him right in that alley.

Fuck! His tracker didn’t work but thanks to the bracelet I made him wear, I knew he was still alive.

It took too long to reach Sari. He has been roughed up by a sick piece of shit right under my nose. If anybody was to kidnap him, it should have been

me! The sociopathic killer who owns him.

Sari is caressing my face with a hesitant smile on his lips and a hint of determination in his eyes. I turn my face and kiss his palm as my hand slides down to squeeze his ass. Fucking hell. Need to think of a way to show him that me controlling his life is what's best for him. But first things first.

"The fucker?" I ask.

Ezra is the one to answer. "Inside the cottage, unconscious. The other two dead in the back."

"You?" I know it wasn't a coincidence the fact that Ezra was outside the restaurant where Sari went to help organize Sully's party. He was stalking him. Was Ezra's intention to talk to him? I told him to stay away from him.

"The fucker killed the other two and then was knocked out by Sariel when he went back inside the cottage."

I look down at Sari, feeling so fucking proud of him. The deep sea of his eyes is at its lightest, meaning he cried.

"Are you okay?" he asks, inhaling shakily. I hug him hard.

"Relative to what?" I respond cockily.

He sighs. "It's so weird that my tracker didn't work."

"Rami said something was messing with the signal."

His expression changes, brows drawing together.

"Phoenix was." As soon as I hear Ezra's words, I let go of Sari to land a hard one on my brother's jaw.

He grunts and then spits blood on the white ground. "I'll let you have one."

"Fuck you!" He's gotten on my nerves enough by doing everything wrong. "What are you scheming now?"

"Uri!" Sari slides between us, and with an appeasing look, he tries to calm me down. "He told you where I was."

“He contacted me after you arrived here and not the moment you were taken. I didn’t know where you were for two hours, two entire hours. I’m pretty sure he could have stopped the kidnapping, but he didn’t, eh, *brother*?”

Anyone who could take Sari away or does nothing while that happens is an enemy. Ezra keeps his unfazed stare on me without uttering a word, confirming my thoughts. The fucking bastard.

“Now I hear this Phoenix shit,” I hiss. “You weren’t here to save Sari, but to observe him. To study him like you’ve been doing with all of us for months.”

“I can’t deny that. He was quite the surprise.”

I have the urge to throttle the fuck out of him.

Sari’s hands push against my chest as I send a murderous gaze Ezra’s way. “Whatever his motivations, I managed just fine. I’m grateful he told you my location. He didn’t have to, you know?”

Why is Sari defending him now? It’s turning my burning anger into a blazing fire.

“Is this how you treat what’s yours?” I bark. Ezra told me he saw Sari as his, and still, he didn’t try to protect him.

“I treated him with respect,” he deadpans, moving his eyes to Sari like they are exchanging a secret fucking conversation I can’t be part of. “I saw Sariel’s file. I suspected he could take care of himself,” he keeps going.

“And I did.” I feel a tap on my chest and look down at Sari’s bruised face. “I did. I took care of it…by myself.”

“This again? I don’t doubt your abilities, Baby Blue, but you’re too trusting and not a very good judge of character.” His instincts are worth shit. His soft heart and naivety are the precise reason why we are in this predicament. That’s exactly why he needs protection, which Ezra didn’t provide.

He sighs as I push my face against Sari's hair and breathe him in again. It's calming, temporarily quieting the murderous whispers inside my head while grounding me to the spot.

Nevertheless, this thing with my brother isn't going to end here, so I'll push it to the side for now. "*Tonight* you will tell me everything you know about Phoenix, even if I have to punch it out of your smug mouth."

He smirks bigger, then outstretches his hand. A red Band-Aid is lying on his palm. I don't accept his offer, but Sari does. He applies it to my forehead just as I see Rami and Rague rushing our way.

Rami wraps both me and Sari in a bear hug.

"Let the fuck go!" I threaten him.

"Hugs are a great way to blow off steam."

"I like the more traditional way." I groan as he finally lets go. *Mauling and killing are so much more satisfying.*

"Fuck!" Rami turns to Ezra. "Look, the clone is finally showing his face."

"The hacker with the dirty mouth," my brother counters. "And the muscleman who likes music."

Rague just growls his way before turning to Sari. "Okay?"

He answers with a nod.

"We scoped out the place and already moved the unconscious fucker into the van," Rague lets me know. I don't need to remind them he's mine to torture, they already know that.

"How should we dispose of the two corpses?"

"A Molotov cocktail?" Rague suggests; I can hear the anticipation in his voice.

"That again, pyromaniac?" Rami mocks Rague's love of setting things on fire.

"Setting it on fire is the best option," Ezra interjects.

“Why?” I ask, waiting for his answer to shoot it down.

“The Lockhart exchange principle.”

“The criminologist from the nineteenth century?” Sari sounds interested as he turns his head toward him. I keep him in my arms; don’t like this new *coziness* between them.

“More scientific stuff,” Rami mutters.

“Lockhart stated that it was impossible for a criminal to leave a crime scene without *leaving* some trace behind, hair, blood, etc.…or to leave the crime scene without *taking* something with them.”

“That’s why it’s called the exchange principle.” Sari nods.

“And that’s why we should burn the whole place down, and afterward our clothes. No evidence left behind,” Ezra finishes.

And fuck, if Sari agrees, it’s fine by me.

“That actually makes sense, clone.” Rami seems taken too.

“Science rules! Let’s burn it, baby.” Rague’s raspy excitement is too fucking much.

“You do it,” I tell them. “Don’t fucking follow us!” I hitch Sari up, and he instantly wraps his legs around my waist as I walk deeper into the forest and away from the others. He weighs absolutely nothing. Each step makes him shiver in my arms as he feels my half-hard cock rubbing against his hole.

He’s holding onto me so tightly, clutching me to him with his face buried in my neck.

“Uri?” His voice is quiet, and there’s a strain in it I’ve never heard before, like something is breaking just underneath his words.

“I’m here, and I know where you’re going to go. I’ve known since the day I first saw you. You have no other place but by my side.” I state those facts as clear as I possibly can as I stop near a tree and put Sari down to pull his pants off. It’s damn cold, but I’ll warm him up soon enough.

“Where did he touch you?” I whisper darkly as I rip the thin lace off his stiff cock. I haul him into my arms again and push his back against a tree trunk.

“Nowhere,” he pants, knowing what I mean. I can see the sincerity shining brightly in his half-lidded, light blue eyes peering back at me—and the desire. The awe and the excitement. It all takes my damn breath away.

He’s fucking gorgeous. Messy, black hair reaching down his shoulders. Parted lips seemingly about to say something seductively enticing. His smooth skin is flawless, and I fucking hate seeing those bruises on Sari’s face again. I can’t make them disappear, but I can obliterate them from his memories if even for only a short period of time.

“I’ll shove my dick so deep, you’ll feel me in your throat,” I let the dirty promise reach his ear as I grind said jeans-clad part against his balls and hole. He shivers before crushing his mouth against mine with messy desperation. Our tongues twist and thrust together as hectic breaths clash. His mouth is somehow docile and greedy at the same time, while I kiss him so hard it feels like I’m pulling his tongue out.

His legs shift anxiously before spreading wider to let my hips press more firmly between them. He breaks the kiss and gazes up at me with lust-dazed eyes, breathing hard, tongue wetting his red lips.

I know every inch of his stunning body. I’ve fucked him so many times, I know exactly what sets him off. I’ve touched him so thoroughly, I know every single sweet spot. And right now, I want us to tangle into each other more and more until we turn into a hot, crying, grunting, dirty mess.

Sari takes one of my hands and brings it to his face. He kisses my palm and gives it a long lick before sucking my middle finger into his mouth.

“Use only one finger. I want it to sting,” the tempter says sexily before swallowing my finger again.

My teeth sink into my lower lip as I groan and grab a handful of his hair. All the blood rushes to my cock.

“I fucking want my whole body inside you,” I growl. His tongue is drenching my finger in saliva, sucking it like a fucking pro.

Unable to wait any longer, I pull my hand back and plunge the slick finger inside him all the way to the knuckle. Sari gasps, pulling at my dreads as I start to work him.

“Look at me when I fuck you open,” I demand, grabbing his cheek hard, forcing those pools to mine. Jesus motherfucking Christ, the face he makes while getting fucked is the living embodiment of lust.

“Uri, Uri, Uri.” My name on his lips is like a prayer.

I’m going to consume him whole, leave no fucking crumbs of him. I’m inebriated by him, struggling to stop myself before there’s nothing left.

“Show me those nipples,” I order him as my finger keeps pumping inside his wet heat. “Pull that sweater up and hold it in your mouth. Bite on it.”

So fucking sexy, that birthmark under his right nipple. I grunt, and pushing his body up, I suck on it before moving to the bud. My free hand alternates slaps and pinches on the other nipple while Sari writhes under me so fucking beautifully.

Shit, I’m so hard for him. I need to be inside him. I remove my finger and open my jeans with quick movements before lining up the leaking crown of my cock and forcing the whole length inside him.

His cry is muffled by the fabric in his mouth as he bites hard on it. His glazed eyes go wide as I rapidly bottom out. I growl all my animal satisfaction at taking what’s mine, of filling him deep, stretching him. He’s full of cock. My long, thick, pierced cock. His hole throbbing around it.

He’s twitching and sucking my dick, so fucking hungry for it. I don’t give him time to get used to my thickness and start pounding, giving him more of the sting he so eagerly demanded before. His lean torso arches as I grip hard on his waist, leaving my fingerprints on his pale skin.

“Yes. Yes. Hurt me,” I think he begs around the sweater in his mouth.

“You’re so good at taking it raw.” I grunt, letting the bare pleasure spread all over my body.

Sari can’t stop broken, wanton moans from leaving his mouth with every thrust I give him. He’s clinging to my body, his hands roaming all over my back before finally stopping on my ass to pull me deeper inside him.

“You feel how deep I am? I’m going to wreck you from the inside out.” I want to get where no one will ever reach inside of him.

His lips let go of the sweater. “Rip me to pieces. Own my body. Take my soul. I’ll give it all to you,” he cries out, completely lost to the bliss. He feels so fucking amazing, custom-made for me and only me.

“I’ll take it without asking. It’s all mine. Never fucking doubt it.” I grab his wrists and yank them up over his head against the tree trunk. Keeping him pinned under me, at my mercy. What a fucking vision.

“Don’t let me forget then. Leave your marks on me. Punish me for pushing you away. Do it, Uri!”

I give his side two spanks before letting my nails trail down to his thigh. His mouth opens in a silent moan as I see the orgasm about to explode inside him. Oh, but not yet. I grip his dripping cock hard, halting the detonation. My thumb moves on the slit, making Sari scream.

“You deserve every bruise, every bite, every mark I make on your beautiful body. You’ll never say no to me again,” I growl darkly.

“But I will,” he gasps out. “Aren’t you afraid…I’ll leave…again?”

What the fuck did he say? I let my obsession run free. “Then I’ll make fucking sure you can’t walk!”

I piston roughly inside of him; my thumb is still plugging his dick, making it impossible for him to come. Sari is thrashing against the tree, offering his slender neck to me. I let go of his wrists to pull his hair to one side, and I strike down like a damn snake, sinking my teeth deep. The taste of his sweet blood turns my desire raw, while Sari screams out all his unfathomable pleasure.

“Tell me I’m yours. Only me.” His voice breaks as tears start falling.

“Mine. Nobody else’s. I will fuck you until I have eradicated all your doubts.”

He’s pulling my anger apart with every tight clench, every wet kiss, and every erotic moan.

I move my thumb away, and he suddenly throws his head back, neck stretched in ecstasy, his hair a wild mane around his trembling shoulders as cum shoots out and trails down his belly. I wrap my hand around his mouth to silence his moans, which seems to heighten his pleasure.

He clenches around me so hard he forces the jizz out of my dick. And I bellow in bliss as I thrust hard and come deep within him. He shudders against me while I ride out wave after wave of pure ecstasy. In this moment Sari, my Sari, fills my entire being.

I hear both our harsh, ragged breathing in the silent forest. Sari’s small hands caress the broad expanse of my chest. Damn, my body refuses to pull away from him. His flushed skin and sated, affectionate smile, the way his long eyelashes form shadows on those red cheeks. The taste of his throat under my tongue, sweet and iron-like from the skin I broke before.

My cock is still buried deep, and the heat and pliancy of his body makes it twitch. It feels like I’ll never go fully soft. It’s always like this with him. I could stay inside him all day, fucking into him lazily, and the moment my dick hardened enough I could go again. And again. And again.

I lift my head and take his mouth, sipping his taste. When I let go, Sari’s sweet lips are curved into the most brilliant of smiles. I imprint it on my brain to remain there forever.

Hours later, we are back at the base. We stopped at a clinic to get a CT scan and an MRI to see if there were signs of concussion—Sari insisted I got checked too. Once the doctor cleared us—he told us to rest and to come

back if we felt dizzy or nauseated—we left. A little bribe assured us his total discretion.

I won't take it easy, though. Fuck that! I'll give it my worst.

Trent the fucker is in the FUNS room, naked, lying on a table. Hands and feet tied by a chain. Usually I like to keep my donors on a chair, but the fucker here is a special case. The revenge kind. My very first. And after what Rami and Rague found at the cottage, the perfect donor.

They discovered several pictures of naked men bruised and tied up. After a quick check, Serena let us know that every single man in those photos had gone missing or been found dead in Chicago and the surrounding areas in the last four years. Nine men in total. Hunter is collaborating with the police on a case about one of those men.

"We have a serial killer in the base!" Lori declares.

"Whoo! We haven't had a revenge one since I met you, Raph." Michael is looking at Trent with curiosity.

"And you almost died," Raph retorts, not showing the same sentiment, keeping his back to the FUNS room.

"You were the one who got kidnapped and almost strangled. *I* saved you," his husband counters vehemently. *He* saved him? My perfect aim did.

"Should we recall the shooting part?" Rami reminds him. I was awesome as always. Michael…not so much.

I tune their conversation out, glancing at Trent the fucker first, before my gaze stops on Sari. He surely fought tooth and nail, judging by the cuts, broken bones, and bruises he left on the fucker. A sense of pride fills my chest as I smirk at my gorgeous, astonishing partner. My dick agrees as it twitches, wanting more of him.

He's been cuddled by everyone since we came back from the clinic—well Raph bumped his shoulder in something that passed for a pat.

Lori and Ollie are doing a weird celebratory-cleansing dance around him, now flailing their arms and skipping like drunk idiots.

“The Suri get-together plan worked! Cough it up, boys.” Lori stops in front of Gabe with a gloating expression.

My brother sighs. “You’ll have casual Friday at work with Mexican or Chinese food takeaways.”

“Did you really think I’d lose?” He taps Gabe’s cheek. “Hooking two handsome guys together, puh-leeze, my work was basically done for me. I just set it up and walked away.”

Is he talking about me and Sari?

“So, you’re a pimp,” Ollie taunts him.

“No. I’m the sass master.” Lori winks at Sari.

“Who won the Uri-will-fuck-it-up bet, though?” Michael asks. He hates those bets!

“What the fuck! I didn’t!” I growl. Is this the wager Linda was talking about?

“Oh, you did.” Ollie sniffs.

“Ren won,” Raph replies. “He chose today.”

“Bunch of idiots,” I mutter. They’re lucky I’m busy preparing myself for Trent the fucker. I want to focus all of my twisted thoughts on him.

“Where’s Hunter?” Sari asks Ollie. His voice is weak, slightly raspy.

“With the triplets. They went on one of their animal liberation missions.”

Ezra comes out of the lab—he’s been inspecting it for the last thirty minutes—and stops near me. I told him I want answers, so with the others, we decided to bring him here.

Rague and Rami are on their way back from the cottage. They had to stay behind to make sure the flames didn’t reach the forest.

“Is nobody going to talk about the doppelgänger elephant in the room?” Lori suddenly asks. “I mean, there’s two of them now! My hot-twins fantasy would be alive if they weren’t both Uri, ugh.”

“I’m not Uri,” Ezra states as I send a glare Lori’s way.

He pouts, patting his curls as he salaciously says, “So, doppelgänger, tell us about yourself. Every scandalous detail.”

“That’ll take a lifetime to recount.”

“Ah! Thought all psychos were ornery.” Lori’s hand waves in Raph’s direction.

“Gabe, you can do much better.” Raph’s taunt earns him a flipped finger.

The gremlin turns to Sari, who’s writing something on a notepad. “A little suggestion. Ass grabbing is an important part of every relationship. Who needs a love letter when you can just smack it and say’ *I’m happy this beauty is fucking mine*.’”

Gabe suddenly spanks his fiancé’s ass.

**“**Hey!” Lori lets out.

“I’m happy this beauty is fucking mine,” Bez teases him.

I move toward Sari; one arm wraps around his waist, while my hand grabs the notepad.

“It’s time,” I tell him. He said he wants to be in the FUNS room when I work on the fucker. I look into his turquoise eyes. They’re red, he keeps blinking. Did he change his mind? He should lie down. I’m about to push him toward the lab when he gives me a sharp nod.

Well, he wants to make more decisions. This is me not interfering—in a controlled and limited space.

We walk into the FUNS room, followed by Raph—since revenge kills are never done alone, part of the code.

“Is he even alive?” Ollie asks, looking at Trent’s unmoving, bloody body on the table.

Sari replies, “I-I didn’t kill him. I just subdued him. The rest is up to Uri.”

He more than tenderized the fucker for me. It’s more fun when I’m the one to break the donor. “There’s still a lot I can do,” I say as I press against Trent’s eyelid with my thumb, applying increasing pressure.

Eye gouging is painful, but really it’s the psychological torture I’m more interested in right now. Being abruptly woken up by excruciating pain, his brain can’t process anything else. It’s telling him to make it stop, to move away. But he cannot move, terrified to death, overwhelmed by the agonizing sensation, the only thing he can do is take it and bleed.

“We all bleed the same; it’s how we react to the blood that differentiates us, isn’t it?” I declare in a flat tone, just to let him know who is inflicting the pain.

My thumb sinks into his eye ball, ripping a glass-shattering scream out of his lungs.

“You’ve never felt real suffering before today. You touched what’s mine, hurt him, tried to take him from me. Pain will be the only companion in your last moment on earth. And it’s going to be a very long moment, dipshit!” I remove my thumb and grab the wet tissue from the table to clean it.

Revenge can work splendidly if you know when to aim all the contained fury and let it go. And methods that are horrifying to most people can turn into sublime designs with infinite possibilities.

“Where should I start cutting?” I turn to Sari. He takes my hand in his, a firm grip, eyes on Trent. “Tongue or dick?”

“Where will the wheel of death stop today?” Michael interjects. I need to tell Ragne to put a damn switch on that damn intercom from inside the room as well.

“Rip out every one of his organs and grind them to a pulp,” Raph decides to give me his useless opinion.

I ignore him. “Should I pull all his teeth?” A whimper comes from the table, but my attention is on Sari. He doesn’t look disturbed, too used to my methods.

“You’re in so much trouble, serial killer,” Lori feels the need to say. “Torture is Uri’s love language. Gutting you like a pig and using your intestines as floss, translates to professing his adoration to Sari.”

Lori’s statement is not totally wrong. I am dedicating this to my Baby Blue.

“By the way, the pig thing would be totally hard core, ending up in the torture record book,” Lori adds.

“How about if he turns him inside out by shoving his arm down his throat, reaching deep down, and grabbing his butt from the inside?” Ollie suggests. He spends too much time with Rague.

Torture does spur this family's wicked, creative juices.

“Too much work,” I hear Ezra say. “Popping his eyes out and making him eat them seems an easier solution.”

“Those are both meh.” Bez huffs, eviscerating is more his thing

I turn toward them. They’re all on the other side of the glass wall, watching us with interest.

“What happened to the no-comments-from-the-peanut-gallery rule?” I mutter.

Raph dismisses my words. “Cut his hands off and sew them on his head.”

Where does he come up with this shit? “Fuck off!”

“Not good at sewing, eh?” Lori snickers.

“Why the head?” I hear Ollie ask.

“Like a bunny. It’s creepy cute,” Michael replies.

“You’re a freak!” Gabe states.

“We all are,” Raph *defends* his husband.

I see Ezra nodding. He seems comfortable, like he’s always been part of this twisted family. It doesn’t annoy me as much as before. But I’m still irritated by his very presence.

“Let me go! You perverted disgusting sicko assholes!” There’s no missing how strained Trent’s voice sounds.

Sari’s grip around my fingers intensifies. “What he does is not horrible, it’s essential. What you did, on the other hand, to all those poor men and tried to do to me is despicable.” He’s shuddering with anger. So beautiful as he tries to protect me.

“Killing shitheads like you is very therapeutic,” Lori adds.

“You’re mine. Miiiine!” The fucker yells, glowering at Sari with his…eye.

“Say that again, and I’ll mash your balls into a fine powder,” I hiss, yanking at his bloodied hair.

“What a daft prick.” Lori again. I swear I’m going to plug his mouth as soon as I’m done here. “You can’t separate Suri.”

“Suri?” Ezra asks.

“Sari plus Uri,” Michael explains.

“Let’s go back to the torture part, or just off him,” Raph states in a bored tone.

“I’m not yours. I’m his,” Sari suddenly exclaims pointing at our laced hands. Those surges of confidence are cute and sexy.

“You were mine first!” The fucker has the balls to yell—but not for long.

With a roar, I let go of Sari’s hand to grab my Staccato XC 9mm. I flip it and swing the butt down hard on the fucker’s collarbone. He bawls like a newborn baby.

“That means shit.” I drop the heavy metal grip on a rib this time, breaking that too. “I’m the one taking care of him, not you.” Another rib, another cry. “I’m the one coming inside him, not you. Filling him deep and kissing his lips, not you.” I move to his right bloody hand and hammer away. “I wear his brand, and he wears mine.” Now it’s his dick’s turn. “You’re just a talking.” Hit! “Dead.” Hit! “Fucker.” Hit, hit.

I’m not the voice of reason right now; I’m the voice of wrath.

I lower the gun when I feel Sari's hand on my forearm. His face is buried in my shoulder, eyes closed.

I kiss his head, not gently, all I have in me right now is fury and fire. Sari needs the threat to be gone, but doesn't need to be part of the annihilation. Killing is not in his blood. I am. And I'll always give him what he needs.

"Baby Blue. Leave this to me. Focus on the DNA we took from him," I order him.

He nods. Then he lands a kiss on my shirt and leaves. And Ezra comes in, stopping near Raph.

"How do you dispose of the bodies?" he asks. I start cleaning Pamela's grip —the Staccato was of use finally, it has earned its name.

"Acid," Gabe is the one to answer from the other side of the glass wall.

"John George Haigh style?" Ezra's questioning is getting on my nerves.

"Oh, the acid bath murderer," Sari exclaims before walking into the lab.

"That was a clean-freak serial killer." Michael sends a look at Raph, who huffs at him.

Ollie gets in on the conversation as well. "Creepy, Freddy creepy."

"Why not use a wood chipper?" Ezra again.

"Too messy," Gabe responds.

I leave Pamela on the table and glance at Trent. He's whimpering and softly moaning. Does he think this is over? I hope so, because he's in for a huge surprise.

I walk to the mini flamethrower—a more portable version of a traditional one.

"Where did you get that?" Ollie asks me.

"Home Depot."

“How much?” Does he want to buy one for Rague? I think he has like six of these.

“On sale around seventeen bucks.” It’s small but very effective at melting skin off bones.

“Are you going to get the nipple enlarger?” Lori’s eyes are on the long pair of metal tweezers dangling from the ceiling.

“You mean the nut re-arranger,” Michael states.

“Nope. It’s the potty re-trainer,” Gabe feels the need to utter.

I’m about to tell everybody to fuck off when an alarm starts blaring.

“Fire, Fire, Fire.” Serena’s voice echoes inside the base. “Proceed to the closest fire exit with caution.”

Fire? I look up. The sprinklers on the ceiling are not working. I turn to the lab where Sari is. He grabs something from his desk before making his way to the others.

“Rami,” Raph answers his phone, and then only listens to our brother talking on the line.

“A fire started in the shack in the backyard,” he says. “The wind is bringing it toward the house. The fire safety system was activated, but there seems to be a malfunction. We need to get out of here.”

A malfunction—is that why the sprinklers are not working?

“A fire and Rague is not here,” I hear Ollie say. It’s ironic in a way.

I drop the flamethrower and move to the tool table.

“I’ll go check on Ferdinand and Sophia.” Gabe is talking about the people who work in the main house.

“You all go, take Sari. I’ll finish here.” Raph nods at me in understanding as he grabs Michael and a reluctant Sari and drags them away.

“I’m right behind you,” I call after him.

“I’m going as well,” Ezra is holding the door open.

“I’ll find you later. I need those answers.” I give him a threatening look, to which he smirks before walking away. Fucker!

I pick up Pamela one more time and walk near the table. I aim for Trent’s head—I wanted to prolong the agony, but I need to make sure Sari is fine.

“Time to die, motherfucker.”

Trent grits his teeth and meets my gaze. His mouth opens, but I don’t let the words come out. The bang of the bullet leaving my gun and piercing the air is the only sound I hear. My hand snaps slightly back from the recoil, and I take a big breath before lowering it. His head flops back before rolling to the side. One empty eye stares at nothing.

Blood starts dripping from the hole in his forehead. The red drop slides down over his eyebrow and lands on the metal surface of the table. I’m hypnotized as more join it, forming parallel patterns on his forehead before creating a crimson puddle. I watch, feeling a peaceful satisfaction.

Serena’s voice shakes me out of it and I hurriedly walk to the door. When I pull, though, nothing happens. It’s locked. I try again. It has to be stuck.

Sari suddenly appears on the other side.

“What the fuck are you doing here? Where’s Raph?”

“Trying with Gabe and the others to contain the fire. It reached the back of the house,” he replies, as he inserts the code into the door keypad.

But I don’t hear the clicking sound of the lock. Is this door malfunctioning, as well? I smell trouble. I need to get Sari out of here.

“Why won’t it open?” He tries again to no avail. He looks anxious, pulling at the handle again and again.

“Baby Blue, move aside,” I order him as I lift my gun and shoot four bullets at the door handle. Rague really chose the best materials when he built the bulletproof wall. No cracks.

“Go!” I yell at Sari.

“No!” He replies. I see movement behind him, and I’m surprised to find Ezra coming our way.

“Come with me,” he tells Sari.

“But Uri! We need to get him out of here!” He’s so beautiful when he cries. He raises his hand, pressing his palm over the glass. I cover his with mine, the cold material stops our skin from touching.

“I will. I promise you. But I can’t, knowing you aren’t safe.” I look into his gorgeous light blue eyes before turning to my brother. “Take him out of here, Ezra.” I’ve never begged anyone, and I won’t start now, but if my brother doesn’t take him to safety right this instant, I will maim him.

“I won’t leave you,” Sari sobs.

“He’s ours.”

Ezra smiles at my begrudging words. “Hurry up!” he says before lifting the most precious thing in my life and hauling him away.

I try to pull the door open again, but the fucker won’t budge. Luckily, I’m surrounded by tools. I quickly find the crowbar Rague likes to use on the donors and wedge the end into the very tight gap between the door and frame. I push and pull with all my might, using everything I have to get the damn thing to open.

I groan as the bolts begin to give, and using all my weight, I give it a final hard shove. The door finally busts wide. The smell of smoke is filling the air, making my nostrils itch. I’m in the basement of a burning house. I need to get the fuck out.

I make my way to the stairs when a sudden gnawing feeling in my gut makes me turn around. Two loud bangs, and my right leg gives out as pain spreads rapidly up from my thigh.

I grit my teeth as I see the silhouette of someone walking toward me, gun in hand. An oxygen mask is covering their face, and they are wearing a fireman’s uniform.

I dropped Pamela when I fell. I only have my switchblade inside my pocket.

“And then there was one. Or should I say seven? Pity the others fled. Locking the door was timed too late; you were all supposed to be imprisoned inside the basement and to burn into a crisp.” Their voice sounds distorted, but they don’t hide their snigger as they look at me.

“Who are you?” I grit my teeth against the throb in my leg. My hand pressing on the wounds feels wet. The bullets didn’t hit the artery—there would have been much more blood if that was the case—but it still hurts like a motherfucker.

“Ah, still in the dark. How have you all survived? Pathetic. Insignificant nothings.”

“Phoenix,” I spit out. Only they could have planned this circus. Fucking piece of shit.

“Oh, that name. He died before he could tell you…I see.” Who are they talking about? Ezra?

He takes a few steps closer. The air is getting thicker around us.

“What do you want?” I cough; my breaths are becoming labored.

“I just take pleasure in other’s distress and pain. Especially yours. You see, someone’s true nature is always revealed, no matter how much one tries to hide it. Especially if people keep poking at one’s sensitive spot!”

“You started it,” I bark. “And when you excessively hate something, it’s because you recognize that same thing within yourself.” Or some shit like that.

Phoenix’s angry growl makes me smile. *Gotcha!*

“Me, on the other hand, I just want to tear you to shreds,” I let them know.

“When are you and your pitiful, miserable group of losers going to realize that you’ve been outmatched? I’ve been toying with you this whole time. Directing you like…little insects.”

“You’re lying,” I goad them. If they keep talking until the smoke gets thicker, I can try to reach for my switchblade and stab them with it, preferably in the head.

“Who put that serial killer on One’s path and then told him where to find Two when he was kidnapped? Who pushed Six into that illegal fight ring and kept poking at him until he went berserk?”

They’re using our subject numbers, which suggests that they were part of Project Blood Assassin. Linda assured us that all the scientists and government heads were killed. But how about the guards? Could one have escaped their deserved fate somehow? If that’s the case, I’ll remedy that.

Phoenix keeps going, “Who sent Three and his pathetic AI on a merry quest against a senatorial candidate while I was creating a drug empire? Five got right in the middle of it; I wonder how? And who do you think made Four’s tracker malfunction?”

I’m going to make them bleed from every hole, then create new holes to fill with blood.

“Unfortunately nobody died except Eight. But his death is terribly vexing. *I* wanted to be the one to cause it.” They sniff. So they think Ezra is dead. “I’ve been using the people you care about, your own emotions, your own weaknesses against you.” The wicked pride dripping from their revelations makes my gut twist with anger and excitement. They have been fucking with us for more than a year, which suggests an indomitable enemy—one I’ll enjoy maiming.

“All your twisted meddling did was push us toward our partners. You are our personal matchmaker.” I snort.

“Your mommy doesn’t seem very happy in that hospital bed.” I stifle the growl inside my throat. That’s confirmation Phoenix was the one to poison Meg. “You’ve all been pathetically *hunting* me down for months like I’m some sort of monster, when in fact, you are the merciless murderers. Your last kill is right in the next room.” They point at Trent’s corpse lying on the table.

“We have a code.”

“A code?” They chuckle. “Everything I’ve done, all my actions were caused by you and those other scums of the earth you call brothers. Poisoning that hag was so satisfying.”

“Fuck you!” I hiss. I want to yank that mask off their face and rearrange their features until there’s only blood and goo left.

“You need to suffer for ruining my life,” they spit with so much hate I can almost see it, palpable in the already suffocating air.

“I don’t even know who you fucking are,” I dismiss their anger hoping to make them reveal themselves.

Smoke is slowly coming in. In my seated position, the air is less heavy, but soon I won’t be able to breathe easily. The wall behind me is getting hot, the fire is no doubt spreading inside the house. I don’t have much time.

“You’ll die without knowing who I am. I like that. Burned alive. Seems fitting, don’t you think? Poetic justice.”

Whatever. “Justice is like true selflessness, it doesn’t exist,” I state as they aim the gun at my other leg. A shot resounds, but not from their gun. It came from behind me and it forces Phoenix against the opposite wall. Then another and another. I pull out my switchblade and throw it at Phoenix’s head. It pierces the oxygen mask right at the center of their skull.

I turn to see Ezra lowering Pamela. He has an axe in his other hand and his bandana over his mouth.

He slides Pamela into his jeans and jogs my way. He crouches down and hands me a damp towel, then wraps his arm under my shoulder to pull me up. I let out a groan into the towel when a sharp, shooting pain hits my leg. Motherfucking shit!

“The thing you said about justice…not entirely true,” Ezra tells me, as he turns us toward the exit. “You good?”

“Do I look good?” I snap, glaring at him. My leg is fucking killing me. “Wait, we need to check Phoenix is dead.” Even though after three bullets and a knife to the head it would be…

“Where the fuck did they go?” I cough out, when I see the place where Phoenix was lying is empty. The blood stain on the wall reassures me that we did hit them. Not enough though. Fuck! The switchblade Sari gave me is on the floor.

“Get that,” I tell Ezra.

“Fuck it, we need to go.” He’s coughing too.

I push against his chest to get to the blade, but Ezra suddenly lets me go to do it himself.

“If we die because of a damn knife, I’ll be really pissed,” he states as we make our way to the stairs.

Gray smoke is filling the area in front of the lab, which tells me that the flames are not far away. It’s like we are going into the belly of the beast. The further we go, the harder it is to orient ourselves. I squint through the clouds of smoke. The sounds of burning and of my own breathing the only things I can hear. I spot the bottom of the stairs that will lead us up into the garage. Ezra adjusts his arm around me, and then I start my excruciating way up. It fucking hurts. Beads of sweat are running down my face and back. I can barely breathe, the towel over my mouth hardly helps.

Somehow we reach the garage. The large roll-up door is open, letting cold, fresh air in, but flames are bright and blazing near the door on the right, which opens to the main house entrance. That same door suddenly explodes, and a burst of flames billows out from inside, throwing us back into Gabe’s car, knocking the wind out of me as I hit the windshield.

“Fuck!” I hear Ezra shout my exact sentiment as he grabs my arm to steady both of us.

My heart is pounding, blood rushing in my head, and all I can think of is the feeling of Sari’s lean body against mine. Safe.

We slowly continue on until we are outside. I can’t feel the winter cold. Like I conjured him out of thin air, Sari is suddenly in front of me, holding me tight. His sweet honey and apple scent surrounds me, almost erasing the smoky smell inside my nostrils.

“You idiot!” I feel his body trembling as he lets out a sob. “God, why do I have to put up with you?”

“Because you love me,” I simply remind him, as I move us further away from the burning house. I stop only when we reach the others. I try to

ignore the searing pain in my leg and back, but it’s getting harder.

I limp to the small wall on the side of the driveway and sit there.

“Oh shit, your leg!” Sari kneels down at my feet. “Bullet holes?”

I nod as he starts to tear my jeans to get a look at the wounds.

“One went through, but the other needs to be removed,” he tells me as his trembling hands tie his scarf around my leg. “An ambulance is coming.”

A groan leaves my lips as he tightens the knot. “What the hell happened? Was it Ezra?” He sits next to me, and I tuck him into my side.

“No.” The sound of the fire trucks speeding down the driveway halts my explanation. The firemen jump down and start doing their thing. One goes to talk to Raph and Gabe, both covered in soot. Michael’s pants are wet as he clings to his husband’s side. Lori is taking care of a small burn on Ollie’s arm just as Rague’s Jeep stops a few feet from us, and he flies out of it with Rami behind him. Ezra didn’t leave. He’s looking at the house with a serious expression on his face.

I turn my eyes to the fire now blazing out of control. The tall orange and red flames illuminate the forest surrounding the three-story building, the top level aglow. The firemen aim two water streams, one at the second and the other at the first floor, when suddenly an explosion bursts out from the roof, followed by another. Massive fireballs light up the night sky, sending sparks flying through the air like confetti. I spot large plumes of smoke billowing out so thick they hide part of the house.

“Jesus,” Rague mutters, for once not excited as he peers at the horrible sight with Ollie in his arms.

“Bloody hell,” Lori echoes his feeling, wrapping himself around Gabe.

I don’t share the sad expressions on most of my brothers—Michael is even shedding tears. Meg hated this house even though it was her family’s. Linda always commented how cold and tacky it was. I don’t feel upset at the loss, but I am fucking furious. Because Phoenix took yet another thing from me. From us. And I let them. I had them in front of me, and I didn’t kill them.

An ear-cracking boom ricochets through the night sky. I shield Sari's face as four windows on the second floor explode, sending debris and embers to the ground far from us.

"You were shot by Phoenix?" I hear Lori's baffled voice just before more chaos explodes around me.

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# *epilogue*

SARIEL

THREE DAYS LATER

Nervously, I tuck a wild lock behind my ear and then push the heavy braid over my shoulder.

I'm naked. My cute rose lingerie set made of lace and cotton—or what Uri left of it—is somewhere on the wooden floor.

The blindfold covering my eyes takes away my sight, but all my other senses are alive, sharpened. The hint of musk in the air from our sweat and the rich smell of sex. The erotic caress of the velvety, purple collar around my neck and the smooth ties around my wrists. The clinking sound of the long, thin chains going from my neck to my wrists, at times brushing my hot skin. The feeling of Uri's slick cock sliding between my ass cheeks. His sweaty body behind me, hard and unrelenting.

The bondage itself is new and a little unnerving, but being at his mercy pushes all my buttons—some I didn't even know existed. Wanting to experience even more of the unusual intensity my body is savoring, I push my butt out, arching my back. Uri's cockhead bumps against my gaping, dripping hole, triggering a series of shivers up and down my body.

"Why touch yourself when you can come just from getting fucked?" he whispers roughly, straight into my ear, pulling on the chains until he forces

my hands behind my back—which I didn’t even realize were touching my length.

*I can’t come at all!*

The cock ring he slid around me thirty minutes ago is pushing desperate tears out of my eyes all over the blindfold. I want to orgasm so badly I’ll do anything he wants.

He nudges my legs further apart with his foot and bends me down from his sitting position. A tremble of excitement goes through my tingling balls, then up my back, and all the way down, stopping at my bound hands. He forces my cheek to the wall with a decisive push, the position not very comfortable. But the location ceases to matter the moment his crown kisses my hole, pressing against my rim. I can’t see anything, but I can imagine his eyes, pools of fiery hazel filled with depraved desire. My whole body quivers, empty and craving, my pucker clenching around nothing, attempting desperately to suck the tip in.

And then he thrusts again, all at once, one long, heavy slide of his long cock, his piercing dragging against my walls, so deep in me that it punches the air out of my lungs. For a long moment he doesn’t move, buried, throbbing in me, letting me feel every inch of hard, thick dick.

I moan as he suddenly slides even deeper, leaning forward so I can feel him bury himself to the very hilt. Oh God. Feels like he’s splitting me in two, like he’s reaching my stomach and poking at it.

“You’re thinking,” he says with a voice gravellier than before, pulling back slowly and then slamming into me. “I don’t fucking like it.” His tongue is liquid against the oversensitive skin of my neck.

“About…you,” I confess on a panted breath. How could I not think of him? He has no clue what he does to me. How much space he takes up inside my head.

His dark chuckle pushes some strands to the side, then he sucks hard on my neck. I gasp and moan as he yanks me down on his dick, pulling the chain on my wrists back. He’s sitting on a high, rolling chair, his healing leg

propped on a stool on my right, but he’s still the one holding the reins—and the chains.

“Sexy as fuck on my cock,” he mutters, all rumbly. His voice melts my insides, and I clench hard around his delicious shaft.

Every time it goes inside, my body tenses at the feel of him filling me up. His hand moves to my head, keeping my cheek firmly on the wall. The fact that I can’t see what he’s going to do to me creates such exhilaration inside it’s becoming hard to breathe.

It hurts. It hurts so good. I don’t have a hope of bracing myself. All I can do is suffer the enjoyment as he pulls me back onto him, setting a brutal pace.

“How does it feel to be railed while handcuffed? To be forced to take it?” He grunts.

Forced? If my mouth could stop pushing out moans, I’d laugh at that. Because I’d never say no to being taken by Uri. To experiencing new levels of ecstasy and torment with him. I can’t get enough, want him so damn badly.

As he keeps ramming inside me, pain and pleasure are intertwined so deeply they become one. The cock ring is sadistic torture—the perfect tool for him. I’ve been on a razor’s edge of an incendiary climax for far too long. I’m going to pass out very soon if Uri keeps edging me.

It feels so good, so, so good. The way the hard, hot cock in me seems to mold my insides into something else. Something of his. A sob rushes out of my throat as I arch up, trying to meet his thrusts and fuck myself on him, chasing this addictive sensation. I’m there. I’m there, I can almost grasp it. The pressure in my belly pulses frantically with my racing heart. Every single muscle is drawing tight, tighter with each merciless drive of Uri’s hips. And the tight ring around the base of my length holds me here, in a pre-orgasmic limbo.

“Please, take the ring off. Please…” My voice cracks as I shamelessly beg him.

“Oh fuck, Baby Blue.” He stops his thrusts and pulls out. The abrupt movement makes me cry.

“Widen your legs,” he demands with that moan-inducing guttural voice.

I frown but eagerly oblige, hoping he’ll finally listen to my plea.

He spreads my cheeks, brushing his thumb delicately on the still tender U he carved on my left cheek two days ago with the tip of the switchblade I gave him while I was orgasming so intensely I blacked out. Bliss and agony exploded at the same time, and my already exhausted brain couldn’t take it. I’d asked him to give me an indelible mark several times, and he finally did it in the most perfect way.

His hot, wet tongue suddenly spears me, and I cry out my desperate need while all my thoughts vanish into thin air.

“Tell me you love me,” he commands suddenly. He kisses my hole, tongue flicking into the center, insistent and dirty and coaxing.

“Please,” I can barely gasp out. He thrusts his tongue into me, spearing me open, my already stretched rim giving way for him, eager to be filled again.

“Tell me you love me.” I hear the words burrowing into my body, making it vibrate.

“Please, Ur…ahhh, please take it off. I can’t…” I’m on the edge of madness. Hands still trapped on my back, his long fingers around my wrists. My rock-hard dick is jerking and yelling, “have pity!”

“Say it!” he growls before pulling hard on the chains, yanking my torso up. My arms burn, my back aches splendidly.

He slides the ring around my cock off with a confident pull—sucking all the air from my lungs—and then eats my hole like his only job is to feed. I struggle to keep still; my hips move on their own, my dick weeps incessantly, as Uri increases the pace of his tongue-fucking. He licks up and down my crack, then swirls his tongue on the rim like he’s enjoying every single inch of me. This is the first time since he slid the blindfold onto me that I wish I could see him.

“So much to play with,” he breathes possessively on my overly sensitive pucker.

When his warm palm pulls and squeezes my balls, it's game over. My head rolls back, my guts seem to tear under the pressure of the most powerful climax. On a wail, I scream, "I love youuu…"

My essence rises up to the ceiling and then plummets down, filling my shuddering body again as I paint the wall with ropes of cum.

"Mmm," he hums with gusto as he gives a last lick, making me jolt.

His fingers start whispering over the skin of my back, possessively tracing the bites, bruises, and scratches he made. Every touch is reverent and entitled, reminding me who I belong to. His hand stops on the U on the rise of my left butt cheek.

"Your skin is painted with my marks. You are my own personal, and only, masterpiece, Baby Blue."

The madness and obsession in his voice, the force of his dominance, I melt under it.

"But it seems you need some more since I had to repeat myself three times before I got my answer." There's a hint of irritation in his teasing tone. I hear him shifting behind me. Then the rustle of clothes and the clinking of metal…his belt. Oh shit! Goose bumps erupt all over my arms, still pinned down, and my dick twitches with renewed anticipation.

I'm so drawn by him that I edge backward, pressing my ass into his palm.

He takes hold of the chains on my wrists again as I push my forehead against the wall. Waiting…eagerly for the punishment to start.

"I'm going to give you three stripes across with my belt as a punishment for your selfish behavior." The sudden feel of smooth leather dragging along my spine makes me tense. Heat coils in my gut.

"One for each time you made me ask." The small growl that comes out of him pushes a whimper up my throat. The leather continues its slow, cold journey over my nape, my shoulder, and down my arm, almost leaving a flaming trail.

Having reached my limit, I exclaim, "Do it!"

“You sure you’re ready?” He’s still teasing me. Can this be called edging as well? For a masochist like me, it must be.

“Only I know if I’m ready or not! I want it,” I utter with impatience, biting at the inside of my lip to stop myself from begging again.

I arch my back and stick my ass out instead, going for a tempting move. Hopefully he’ll bite. It sends a tremble of excitement down my spine, and I suck in a deep breath and hold it. I hear the belt cutting the air just before it strikes hard across my ass. The harsh sound echoes in the room as I squeeze my eyes. My body jerks against the sharp pain, and I let out a moan and a cry as the lower half of my butt is set on fire.

*Ohmygodyes!* My brain is again on strike as my breath quivers. My body has the reins right now, and all it wants is more. I’m high on pain and I don’t want to get down ever again.

The leather belt strikes again, a little higher this time. *Spank!* My ass stays in the same position, even though my legs feel like jelly. The pain tastes like surrender and intoxication.

“The sight of those cherry-red welts across your plump, bouncing ass. Fuck, Baby Blue!” I’m barely aware of his aroused voice as he slaps his hard, leaking dick against the burning skin, making me hiss and then shiver with pleasure.

I can feel the drops of sweat forming along my spine as he continues blowing my mind in the best way possible.

“Here comes the last one,” he warns me. I freeze, don’t think I’m even breathing, as I feel his soothing thumb rubbing over my lower back.

My thighs shake just a little as I strain to get my ass higher for him. *Swoosh, spank!* The pain hasn’t yet spread over my skin when I feel Uri’s mouth sucking along the red lines. When I finally register it and the scorching ache unfurls like hot flames over my flesh, I start making weird little noises like a small kitten. I don’t know what I’m feeling. It’s like my brain can’t recognize pleasure from pain anymore, but my dick doesn’t care as another orgasm hits me hard. Cum shoots out from my once again untouched shaft, and my hole pulses, still wanting to be filled, craving what

Uri—and only my Uri—can give me. My throat hurts from how many times I've cried out. I shiver as his tongue keeps tormenting me, lapping, spitting, then sucking again. His fingers rub over my cockhead, scooping some cum.

"I fucking love the salty tang of your jizz," he growls. His words sound crazy hot to me, but I might be drunk on orgasms. I'm also not sure whether the tingling and prickling sensation in my nipples is the result of his pinching or just my reaction to his voice.

On impulse, I blindly turn my head around as I straighten up and clumsily search for his mouth. When I find it, I give him a kiss that leaves my lips feeling bruised. He holds on to the back of my neck as I break the kiss, just so he can crush his mouth on mine. Our tongues tangle and battle until I find myself sitting on top of him, face to face. I hiss for a moment as my ass touches his thighs. Then the blindfold is slipped off my eyes, leaving me blinking at him.

It takes a while for my eyes to adjust, and if I didn't love him and trust him more than anyone else on earth, I'd be terrified of the naked possession stamped all over his face. Like he wants to eat me alive. So profoundly and intensely focused on me and only me.

And he's still wearing that sexy black leather vest open at the front. I could just melt looking at him.

He wraps himself around my body, surrounding me, so all I can smell, feel, and see is him. His morning stubble rubs against my cheeks and chin, and I feel the urge to stroke it all over my chest and nipples. I sigh contently in his cocoon.

Uri and I share a destructive nature—although I pretended otherwise until a few weeks back. But this is what true love is. Not just finding someone, but finding that someone who has the same level of darkness as yours.

*Uriel*

Those blue eyes should be outlawed. They show everything, the whole universe that is Sari, and shit, it's the sexiest thing ever. I'm hard as fuck. I almost came all over his ass when I was punishing him with my belt. He fucking loved it. Loves my sadistic side. Loves me.

Not that this emotion has any importance for me. Love or not, he's mine.

"Fuck me how you like now," he slurs. He came twice and still wants dick.

I smirk as I grasp his ass cheeks roughly, reminding him with the burn who he belongs to. I spread them apart and drive my cock between them, rubbing over his loose hole.

"Get on my dick," I growl into his ear. "Ride me like the world is ending, and the only way to stop it is milking me so damn good and long." I moan, feeling pre-cum roll down the tip.

He moves his cuffed hands—the chains hanging from his collar to his wrists are damn hot—and guides my cock to his hole.

"Your dick is the only one I want to ride." That's what I fucking like to hear.

He's panting, his gaze debauched as my cockhead pushes inside him.

But where did he learn to talk like that? Has he been studying those porn videos again? I don't like that, and he knows it. I grab two handfuls of his ass and squeeze as I drive my hips upward in a hard thrust. I grunt at the feel of his nails scratching my thighs, and fucking hell, the pressure inside his ass is making my balls draw up already.

I start to bounce him up and down on my dick. "I'll punish your ass, abuse it, and fuck it open until it craves the thickness and heat of my cum, coating your insides, filling your hole up, and marking the deepest part of you."

His eyes roll back as I reveal once again how deeply, dirtily, and twistingly obsessed with him I am.

He’s fucking himself fast and rough, feeding his greedy hole again and again, head thrown back, high moans reaching the ceiling, lost to the pleasure I’m giving him. Bouncing on my lap, taking what he needs from me without shame.

I feel a little left out. My hand moves to the collar around his neck. I slide a finger under it on Sari’s nape and start to pull. The fabric presses on Sari’s throat, slowly making it difficult for him to breathe as I continue pistoning inside his ass.

Breath play. Let’s see if my Baby Blue enjoys it.

Judging by the lust spreading inside his shocked, wide eyes and how tightly his hole is gripping my dick now, I’d say he fucking digs it. But of course he does, he is my Sari.

“Your hole is eating me up. I’ll let you ride me up high whenever you want,” I whisper on his lips. “Want me to choke you a little bit more?”

The rapid moan leaving his lips is the answer I’m waiting for, and I pull the fabric, almost ready to finally spill inside him when I see him yielding completely to me. I could do whatever the fuck I want to him right now, and having that sense of power over him is more addictive than any drug.

“Fuck, yes, use that asshole on me!”

His movements pick up, creating an erotic slapping sound every time our flesh connects. I know I need to speed things up. He’ll lose his senses if I keep choking him.

I slide my leg off the stool, ignoring the pain, and clamp a hand on his hip as I ruthlessly slam my hips up, forcing him to accept every inch of cock I give him. His tight ass spasms around me, spurring me on. I grab the collar more firmly to hold him in place, making him gasp.

“This is going to be fast.” It’s my time to ride hard, my pace almost rabid. I’m plowing into him as I have the burning need to feel him surrendering to me, to have his hole welcome my cock over and over, all swollen and begging for more. I brutally pound against his sweet spot, urged on by his choking sounds.

I give his collar a hard tug. His eyes roll back, and then he comes like a fire hydrant over my chest, strangling my dick with all he's got. I'm hit by pure bliss as he shakes on top of me like he's been electrocuted with ecstasy.

"Christ," I growl, giving his ass long, hard thrusts, sending my cum far inside.

"You needed this, didn't you?" I grit out, as more jizz shoots out. "To feel me coming right where I belong." Jeez it's so fucking good!

He's limp in my arms as I continue moving inside him, enjoying the feel of his wet hole a little more. I let go of the collar to cup his face with both hands and bite his lip until I taste sweet, warm blood. He fists a hand in my hair and pulls my head back, licking at the spot I bit. A smile spreads on his mouth, then he kisses me. His tongue batters mine, his teeth sinking, nibbling, claiming. His lips move down to kiss the pomegranate tree tattoo and the blue flowers reverently.

I lace our hands together, looking forward to tomorrow and the appointment we have with Ash to ink our left ring fingers with *Seven+Four*.

"Tell me again," I demand, resuming the kiss, lips catching on his tongue teasing the roof of his mouth and pushing in, almost choking him.

He tilts his head back. "For a sociopath, you really like to hear it." He smirks and then chuckles, making me smile at him.

He wraps his arms behind my neck and clenches hard on my dick. "I love you so much. I don't wish for anything else. Don't need anything else but you, Uri." His confession fills me with satisfaction. My work is done for today.

"I also love when you have your way with me." He waggles his eyebrows in a cute way, and then brushes his fingers over the collar around his neck.

Maybe I can work a little bit longer.

*Sariel*

An hour later Uriel limps out of the bathroom before freezing with his pierced eyebrow raised, gaze sliding up and down my body. Then he eats up the small space between us with two *slow* steps—his leg is still healing; the painkillers must work since he doesn't want to rest.

"I've got no clue why you put on clothes, but take them the fuck off. I'm coming all over your skin before we go downstairs to eat, and I want you to be bare when I do."

*Whoof! The mouth on my boyfriend.* Are all sociopaths this obsessed?

Before I can melt at his feet, my phone starts ringing and ringing; it's like an incessant knock to my short-circuited, lustful brain.

"Tell your phone to fuck off." Uri's words make me huff as he tries to grab my waist. After everything that happened and with Phoenix still out there, I need to take all the calls.

I walk to my phone and see Lori's name on the screen.

"Suriiiiii! We are outside, open the door!" he yells right into my ear.

"Fuck!" I hear Uri.

Two minutes later, I get down to the entrance to welcome…everybody—except Ollie, who went to pick up Sully.

They go into the kitchen after hugging or patting my head, and I close the door behind Lori.

"Why are you smiling like that?" I ask him as he keeps staring at me.

We follow the others. "I'm trying not to think about the boners that popped up all around because of your tree shag the other day in the forest."

“There was nobody around,” I whisper as my neck and cheeks turn scarlet red.

“Animals,” Lori counters.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Raph exclaims.

I see Gabe ready to reply to his brother, but Lori’s hand on his chest stops him. “Hey, feelings here! Yeah, who am I kidding. I don’t give a damn, bully boy!”

I rush to the kitchen, wanting to forget about Lori’s statement. I see Rami and Rague placing five cake boxes on the counter. When I turn, I notice Ezra sitting at the table.

“How did you get in here?” I ask him. He wasn’t with the others.

He smirks.

“By boat. But when in the city he uses the maze of tunnels beneath the ground to move around undetected,” Uri reveals, entering the kitchen.

“Bravo. It took you long enough.” Ezra taps his nose before taking a sip from his coffee mug. How long has he been here? Did he hear us in the bedroom? Does everybody know how we sound when we have sex? Jesus!

“Pretty sure Sari meant inside the house,” Gabe clarifies.

“I asked Rami to add Ezra’s details into the house’s security,” Uri states simply, landing a kiss on my head before moving toward the cabinets to grab plates and forks.

“So, he can get in while we have to stay outside your house?” I can’t see Lori, since I’m making more coffee and tea, but I know he is pouting.

“He has information Uri wants. That we all want,” Raph explains. “And speaking of information, I want to know where Uri hid my sunglasses.”

Uri flips him off. “I had to go inside a freezing lake to retrieve my moccasins, which were fucking ruined.”

“Let’s pause on your idiotic nicking game for a moment.” Rami sounds grim.

Hunter tucks him to his side, while holding Albert E. in one hand. “After the firemen, the police, the fire marshal and arson team—who were all *thanked* for their discretion—left what remained of Meg’s house, Rague investigated the fire. Checking with Serena, we know it originated in the shack in the backyard, near the garden. Someone with a fireman’s uniform—”

“Phoenix, the sleepless malice!” Rague growls threateningly. “I analyzed the burn path, found the point of origin, and checked for signs of accelerant like kerosene which were left in different places around the house to assure it would all burn to the ground. They used potassium permanganate and glycerin to start the fire, then added the kerosene, which caused some of the explosions we witnessed. The flames propagated very quickly, enveloping the house in less than ten minutes.”

“Phoenix didn’t leave any fingerprints anywhere,” Gabe let us know as he stops behind Lori.

“Fingerprints rarely survive high temperature fires, and if they do they’d be corrupted by soot or debris. So it’s highly unlikely we would have been able to find any.”

A heavy silence falls on the room, filled with memories of what we have lost. It’s like we are driving further into the storm when the visibility is zero.

Having Meg in a coma for more than two months has been agonizing, but losing her house and all her things as well? It’s too much. Linda really hated that old mausoleum, but she too cussed like a sailor when we told her about the fire. She’s now trying to cover the cause behind it, calling favors and bribing the people in charge. We can’t afford to get law enforcement agencies entangled in this Phoenix mess, as well.

“Thank God, nobody was harmed,” I break the silence, squeezing Uri’s hand for a moment before letting it go.

“The light turns waxy and brown when someone burns to death in a room because human fat gets congealed in the light bulbs,” Michael reminds me of an article that I read a while ago about fires and human remains.

“Ugh,” Rami makes a gagging face.

“I don’t think I have the stomach for this,” Bez declares.

“Says the guy who scooped up a donor’s eyeball with his fingers and then squashed it in his palm,” Uri says, while I start plating slices of pie.

Yeah, we are still going to eat, regardless of the gory topic. There’s a vanilla sponge cake, red velvet, coconut, chocolate, and tiramisu. They all look yummy. Michael is passing coffee or tea mugs around, while Lori offers the slices.

I leave the last plate in front of Ezra, who’s looking at us eating sweets with a frown on his face. Right, he doesn’t know about our Sunday family meals.

“We usually gather together once a week to eat,” I tell him, patting his shoulder. He saved Uri, I’m grateful to him. All those jealous feelings have disappeared. I know where I stand with my boyfriend, and his brother, as far as I’m concerned, is part of this family, if he wants to be.

I move toward the counter since there are no chairs available anymore. Uri suddenly grabs my wrist.

“You sit on my lap,” he orders me. “Ass on my cock.” The second part is whispered in my ear as I oblige him. His voice has taken on that husky quality it gets when we have sex. My body is conditioned to yield to it, and I shiver against him as I feel the urge to wrap myself around him.

“What are you going to do without your base now?” Ezra asks.

“I can build a new one,” Rague states, shoving a big piece of coconut cake inside his mouth.

“We can’t stop the bloody family side business, though. So in the meantime we will improvise,” Rami adds. He already bought a warehouse—using his favorite shell company Cinderella & Co, LLC.—in the middle of nowhere on the edge of the city.

“Killing feels good. Presumably even to God, since he does it all the time,” Ezra gives us his two cents. He hasn’t touched his cake, but his gaze keeps going to the slice of tiramisu on his plate.

“God?” Raph huffs.

“One of man’s superstitions. Belief in a powerful being that decides humanity’s fate seems to help the largest part of the world’s population,” he clarifies. Yeah, a psychopath believing in a higher being is ludicrous.

Uri snorts as I feel his hand slide under my sweater to caress my belly.

“You said no fingerprints, but Phoenix wasn’t wearing gloves.”

“You sure?” Lori asks my boyfriend; he grabs Gabe’s arms and curls them around his waist.

“He kept his gun pointed at me after shooting twice, what do you think?” Uri snaps.

“Super Model, when I tell you to go fuck yourself, it’s because I care. Orgasms are good for your health. They lower stress levels. So, fuck you!”

I hurriedly lift my fork and push my red velvet cake inside Uri’s mouth to stop the banter before it worsens.

“Maybe he was wearing gloves in the shed when he started the fire and then took them off,” I offer.

“I won’t let you put the big brother guilt on me,” I suddenly hear Sully’s sweet voice as Ollie enters the kitchen before him.

“No need for that. Lori or Serena are always on your ass.”

Sully sniffs with outrage as his shoulder bumps the doorframe with a thud. I still feel sorry for being the cause of canceling his going away/ twentieth birthday party.

I smile at them and wave when they greet us. I introduce them to Ezra since he’s never met them before. The way he’s looking at Sully, the undisguised curiosity in his eyes, I have never seen any kind of emotion in him. It’s a little disconcerting.

“Now that everybody is here,” Gabe starts, turning to Ezra. “You saved Sari and Uri. But you are still keeping information from us.”

“I told you about Marlon Finch,” he declares in a bored tone.

“The chemist who allegedly provided Phoenix the poison to kill Meg.” Hunter says. Rami and Linda have been reaching out to their contacts in New York to try to find him. Gabe and Lori will fly there tonight.

“The way I see it, since you appeared, Meg was poisoned, her house got destroyed, Uri almost killed, Sari was kidnapped. Phoenix admitted to Uri that they are out for revenge toward us for some reason. So why should we trust you?” Raph challenges him. Psycho to psycho.

Ezra makes a tsk sound, not looking fazed by the many suspicious eyes aimed at him. “So needy,” he utters in a calm tone. “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

“It highlights a logical fallacy,” I interject. Looking at all the confused faces around me, I continue, “It means that the lack of evidence supporting a claim does not automatically prove that the claim is false. Essentially, not finding something doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

Michael nods. “It points out the fallacy of arguing that something is not true because there’s no evidence for it,” Michael explains further, perching on Raph’s knees. “Why are you bringing that up?”

Ezra replies straight away this time, “The lack of evidence can be informative. Adermatoglyphia.”

One word, and I understand.

“The condition in which a person has no fingerprints,” Sully voices my thought out loud, earning a sharp look from Ezra.

Phoenix! Doesn’t matter if they were wearing gloves or not.

“Adermatoglyphia is the absence of ridges on the pads of the fingers and toes, as well as on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. The patterns of these ridges, called dermatoglyphs, form whorls, arches, and loops that are the basis for each person’s unique fingerprints,” I recite part of a study I read online.

“Fucking hell!” Rague mutters as he scratches his stubbled cheek. Ollie has rushed to his side, probably to keep him calm.

“Damn!” More curses and surprised exclamations rise in the kitchen.

“You must know Phoenix well to have discovered that,” Uri states, his body feels tense under mine.

“To a certain degree.” Ezra has a real vague way of answering. “Phoenix will lie low to lick their wounds and plan their next move. In the meantime—”

“Cut the crap!” Raph barks, pulling Michael more firmly to his chest.

“Do you know Phoenix’s identity?” Hunter asks in a demanding voice.

“Yes,” Ezra states.

“Bloody Mary Magdalene, enough with the dramatic pauses. Just spit it out!” Lori clips.

Ezra’s eyes move to Uri and me.

“Ezra, if my boyfriend wasn’t sitting on my lap, I would shoot you then leave the room and find someone else to work on,” Uri threatens.

I snuggle further into him as Ezra finally utters, “She’s Subject Nine.”

*Nine?*

*She?*

The End

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# *afterword*

Well, well, well… I know another cliffhanger. But this time I left a hint for the next and final couple in this series. Can you guess who? Ezra is going to aim all his twisted obsession toward…

Just want to give you the heads-up about Izzy—the baker Uri met at his café—he'll be in the triplets spin-off. Okay. No more spoilers!

Thank you so much for diving in yet again another of my stories. It was definitely action-packed, so many things happened, so many characters to think about. I'm drained. But very satisfied.

Uri and Sari were in the back of my head since I wrote One. I needed time to actually create their relationship, that's why I sneaked hints of them in the other books, to give you and myself an idea of what their story could be. I hope you were happy with the result.

Sari's pain kink was quite interesting, I mean aren't always the quiet ones… the kinkiest ones? What a research I've done. Sex toys are the freaking best. I had no idea there were so many types. I think I found a new hobby ; )

**Oh, just in case you are wondering how a hairless guinea pig looks like:**

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# *thank you*

A big, fat, loud cheers to all of you, my readers. I’m on my knees, grateful and humbled by your support.

My kick-ass Street Team, I’m in awe of you.

Beta readers, ARC Team, editor and proofreaders, I couldn’t do this without you.

My PAs, Nicole and Jasmine, the best assistants I could have found.

And my kids and dogs, for keeping me busy otherwise I’d never go out, stuck to my desk writing romance.

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-SIX

-THREE

-FIVE

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